

THE
PLYMOUTH
PULPIT

“PRAYING HOPEFULLY”

PSALM 63

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THE TENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

O God, you are my God, I seek you. My soul thirsts for you.

My flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.

So I will bless you as long as I live. I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night.

For you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me.

But those who seek to destroy my life will go down into the depths of the earth.

They will be given over to the power of the sword. They will be prey for jackals.

But the king shall rejoice in God. All who swear by him will exult, for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

—Psalm 63

They are twenty-eight when they meet on match.com. They understand how algorithms work, but on their first date they keep being surprised by how much they have in common. They talk about everything—including things you are not supposed to talk about on a first date.

Their families are a lot alike. They are both the oldest child. Their little sisters are spoiled. Their mothers are in charge. Their fathers try to be funny.

Their politics are about the same. Their education is similar. Their jobs are comparable. They watched *Game of Thrones* so they could talk to their friends about it, but they secretly like *Brooklyn Nine-nine* a lot more.

All of this makes sense. They answered those Match.com questions in detail. The questions they were reluctant to answer were the religion questions. They both have a strong faith. They pray. They love Jesus. They care about the poor. They go to church. If you mention your religious convictions on

match.com, you can expect a shorter list of possibilities.

They get married less than a year after the first date. Their daughter is born four years after that. Their son three years after their daughter. They have the lives they wanted. They are great parents. They are kind, caring, and fun. They adore their children. They love being a family.

Their daughter and son are like their parents—kind, caring, and fun. They are good students. They like going to church. They like their parents. They laugh at their father's attempts to be funny.

Their daughter is eleven and their son eight when one Friday evening, mother and son go to buy school clothes. They are choosing shirts when a shooter opens fire with a gun that is illegal in almost every country in the world. The mother wraps herself around her son as fast as she can, but he is one of several who have been shot. An ambulance rushes him to the hospital. The surgery lasts several hours.

The father prays with his children each night, so that night he and his daughter pray

that God will heal her brother. They pray every morning. They pray at every meal. Their church prays.

Everyone thinks that he will be fine. How could God not take care of such a wonderful eight-year-old? He dies on Sunday afternoon. On Sunday night, the father goes to pray with his daughter, but she says, "I don't want to pray. I prayed for my brother to get well and he died. It isn't right."

Her father says, "I understand why you don't want to pray, but I'm going to keep praying for you. When you want to pray again, we will."

She is smart, and she is right. Prayer does not work the way we want it to. Prayer does not work the way we think it should.

We pray for an end to gun violence, and there are more victims. We pray for sick children to get well, and they die. We pray for people to be kind, and they get meaner. We pray for wars to stop, and the killing continues. We pray for the environment, and it's getting worse.

We pray for God to make everything right, and so much is wrong. It does not make

sense. Prayer does not work the way nurses wish it would, the way teachers wish it would, and the way parents wish it would.

Some of the people who talk about prayer the most make us want to pray the least. You are from New York so you may not know this—but if you were from where I'm from—you would know that college football starts in thirteen days. Some football players—who get hit in the head a lot—think prayer works the way their fans want it to work.

You have heard the sideline reporter ask, “How did it feel to score the game-winning touchdown?”

The player answers, sort of: “I want to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. God was in control of this game. God was not going to let us lose. We owe it all to God. Yay God!”

How do you think that makes the other team feel? Why is God against their team? If God is picking games, then why did the Blue Devils have a winning record last year? If God's in control, then why doesn't Notre Dame win every game? What are we to make

of Brigham Young having a good team? Why would God ever want Alabama to win?

Lots of fans think God is the reason they won the big game, but it doesn't make sense. Do we really want to encourage people to beg God to fix football games, provide an A on an exam for which we did no studying, or make fall come early so we don't have to sweat through worship, when there is a mess in Washington, D.C. that needs real attention?

A woman who has been in a terrible car wreck has a broken arm, a broken leg, and broken ribs, but she says, "God was watching over me or I wouldn't be here."

We find it hard not to ask, "Why didn't God just keep your car from getting hit?" and "Why isn't God watching over the people who die in accidents?"

Some act as if prayer is presenting a wish list to their doting grandfather in heaven. They inform God what needs to be done and tell God to get to work on it as quickly as possible. They make it sound like God is waiting for them to suggest who deserves to be healed.

From God's point of view it must be amusing and sad to listen to people pray for contradictory wishes. People pray vehemently on opposite sides of the same war. Some pray for God to rig the lottery. Some pray to lose ten pounds five minutes before going to Shake Shack.

Many of our prayers ignore our most profound needs and address mere foolishness. If we pray believing we will receive anything we ask for, then we will find it hard to keep praying when we do not. We may find it easier not to pray. Most of us have been praying all of our lives and still feel like beginners. There is often no sign that God has heard, much less answered, our prayers. We wish every prayer was inspiring, but some prayers are dull. We tell ourselves that we need to pray. We need to pray because we know it's the right thing to do, because we want to be the kind of people who pray and because we think prayer will make our lives better.

Every once in a while, we promise to pray more. You decide to pray for five minutes. You find a quiet place. You begin, "God, it's

been a while since I've prayed. I know I don't pray enough, but I'm praying now."

You think, "This isn't a good prayer. I need to praise God or something. God, I praise you for being so, praiseworthy."

Well, that is redundant.

"God, I thank you for everything I should thank you for."

That is stupid. Maybe I should confess. No, let's skip that. You glance at your watch—only four and a half minutes left. You keep trying to pray, but it does not sound like you want it to sound.

After a while you wonder, "What's in the freezer? Do we still have any Cherry Garcia? I don't need ice cream. I should exercise more. I could get up early and go to the gym. Maybe I can pray on the treadmill."

Prayer can feel like talking to ourselves. We are tempted to give up. Without thinking about it, we stop praying for a while, and we do not miss it much. We wish prayer worked the way we want it to work.

Prayer does not work the way the writer of Psalm 63 wants it to. He has enemies he wants to see get theirs. Gentle people like us

cannot imagine this, but the Psalmist knows a few people he would like to see eaten by jackals.

You can picture jackal-worthy people however you want. Perhaps for you those people are the ones whose pretentiousness makes you crazy. At Starbucks they order “a decaf grande half-soy, half-low fat, iced vanilla, double shot, gingerbread cappuccino, extra dry, light ice, with one Sweet-n-Low and one NutraSweet.”

The combination makes no sense, but it is a way of making someone else go to a lot of trouble. Jackal-worthy enemies do not listen. They are arrogant. They talk behind your back. They act like they are the center of the universe and everyone else is invisible, but no matter how many times you mention them to God, they do not go away.

The psalmist prays that those who seek his “life will be destroyed, given over to the sword.”

He cannot sleep at night, because he longs for God to do more:

“O God, my soul thirsts for you; my heart longs for you, as in a dry and weary desert where there’s no water.”

“Like a thirsty child reaching for a drink, I grasp for you, O God. All that’s within me hungers for you. Everything in me yearns for you.”

But the Psalmist’s longing slowly becomes thanksgiving: “For here in this place of worship, eyes open, drinking in your hope, I’ve called out to you. I’ve sensed your presence in the sanctuary. I’ve felt you near in worship.”

“I realize now that your love for me is better than anything I’ve wanted. My heart is full of joy. My mouth is full of praise.”

“When I’m lying in bed in the middle of the night, I’ll give thanks for your love, for the promise of being in the shadow of your wings. I hold on to you for dear life, and your love will hold me.”

Something deep within us longs for God. At times we lie in bed and wish for more. Though we would not say it this way, we are hungering for God. We want to live in the

shadow of God's wings. We long to be held in God's arms.

We long for God when we go through a crisis and need help. We long for God when life is wonderful and we need someone to thank. We long for God when we have done something horrible and need forgiveness. We long for God when we see something that needs to be done and want guidance.

We long for God when the church is timid and we want courage. We long for God when the church is loving and we want to be a part of it. We long for God in worship when we need to feel God with us. We need to pray because we need God.

We should pray even when it feels foolish. Pray when we do not know what to pray. Pray when we have bad memories that will not go away. Pray when our addictions seem more powerful than we are. Pray when it does not seem like depression will ever let us go. Pray when our child is troubled and we do not know how to help.

Pray when someone we love will not do what we know they must. Pray when we are

not doing what we know we must. Pray when we cannot pray like we wish we could.

You and I may feel like our prayers are foolish, but if our prayers are sincere, then they are not foolish. So pray in the shower. Pray at breakfast. Pray on the way to work. Pray at work. Pray at school. Pray at home. Pray before you go to sleep. Just pray.

Pray for justice. Pray for honesty. Pray for compassion. Pray for hope to be born in our hearts.

Pray longing for God, because our longing is a prayer. Pray because when we pray God will be there, turning hatred to love, doubt to faith, and despair to hope.

What would you say if a girl whose brother died from gun violence asked, “Why should I ever pray again?”

I think I would want to say, “When we pray, God doesn’t always answer our prayers the way we want, but God comes, and deep in our hearts, that’s what we’re praying for.”

Sermon © Brett Younger

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