

When I was confirmed in the United Church of Canada, at Knox in Calgary, there was a guy in our confirmation program named Harley Lockhart. I met Harley at Kasota Camp, east of Red Deer, on a congregational retreat. He had discovered Knox that year after his separation from his wife. He came from a fairly evangelical background, but his own theology had shifted and he found his way into the United Church. One thing he was clear about, however, was his perception of the power of prayer. He prayed for everything. Every time he planned a trip to downtown Calgary, he prayed for a parking meter in front of wherever he was going. "Every time, Blair," he'd say, "there is an empty stall. Every time."

The American feminist theologian and author, Marianne Williamson writes, "A mass movement is afoot in the world today, spiritual in nature and radical in its implications. After decades of declining influence on the affairs of the world, there is once again a widespread consideration of spiritual principles as an antidote to the pain of our times. Like flowers growing up through pieces of broken cement, signs of hope and faith appear everywhere. These signs reflect the light of a transcendent force at the center of things, present in our lives in a corrective and even miraculous manner, a light we can reach personally through internal work of a devotional nature."¹

We might laugh about my friend Harley who dares to come before God for a parking stall. We might say God has much more important things to worry about in the world, but Williamson believes we don't ask God for enough. She quotes Jesus from the Gospel of Thomas "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

After all the hospitality stories, the travelling stories and the lessons about inclusion, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. Only they're fairly specific in this request. "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray." Throughout the gospel of Luke, the disciples have travelled with Jesus for some time and typically after a fairly hectic day of saving lives and feeding thousands and raising people from the dead, they have watched Jesus retire to a quiet place.

¹ Williamson, Marianne – *Illuminata, A Return to Prayer*, Random Books, New York, 1994 - introduction

Jesus isn't being asked about a contemplative practice. The disciples aren't asking for advice on a personal practice. They've seen him in meditation and deep contemplation. It seems by practice, he has been teaching them about that kind prayer. Theirs is a different and fairly specific request. They are asking about community prayer. When we pray together, how should we pray? What should we pray for? "Teach us to pray, like John the Baptist taught his disciples." This is the cue to which Jesus seems to respond.

John the Baptist called his followers to baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. When his followers pushed John on what that meant for them, John would always point to a life of justice, grace, compassion. "If you have two coats, give one away." "Tax only what is required by law." "Extort money from no one, not the people you protect." John is very clear – right practice includes seeking justice. And so Jesus responds to the request by teaching a prayer about justice.

Marion read from the Contemporary English Version. Every Sunday we recite or sing Matthew's version of the same prayer, from the King James Version. I like how Eugene Petterson has translated this prayer in his book *The Message*.

Father,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

This is a prayer for communities of followers to say together, to live out together; this is a prayer to embody in community. The key word is "us." It's not a prayer of personal devotion. It's not a prayer we say in the privacy of our own spaces. This is a very powerful public prayer, that followers are called to lift up. And it's a prayer for justice, for compassion, and for spiritual protection in the company of the community.

And, Jesus encourages his followers to be persistent in prayer. Ask, seek, knock? Do it expectantly. Do it confidently. Do it regularly. Do it seeking the greatest welfare.

In 2006, a movie and a book came out called "The Secret." According to the book's author Rhonda Byrne, the secret, known by a tiny few throughout the ages, is about uncovering one of the timeless, consistent, faithful laws of the universe – the law of attraction. Thoughts become things.

What we turn our attention to grows. What we think about – positively or negatively becomes our experience. Focus your thoughts on a parking stall, and it manifests itself, every time. The law of attraction suggests that continuing to think about the things we want, sets up a cosmic, metaphysical, magnetic chain reaction that brings it to us – sooner or later. Go home this afternoon, and for those who have computers, google “The Secret;” lots comes up.

You’ve heard me say many times that we create our own experience. The law of attraction seems to affirm that idea...what we give energy to grows. What we water, sprouts. But, the problem with the law of attraction is its focus on individual thought. It’s all about what individuals want for themselves personally.

That’s what makes this disciples’ prayer so powerful. It’s about the law of attraction made manifestly more powerful because we pray it collectively. And here’s its greatest gift; we pray it believing that what it calls us to has already taken place.

Holy God, who you are is already real – reveal it!

The world is already right – set it!

We are already alive with the bread we need – keep it that way!

We are already graced, forgiven – others around us are graced and forgiven!

We are already safe – keep us safe.

What experiences do we as a community want to have? Jesus’ prayer teaches us to pray for it persistently, consistently, with confidence and trust, believing what we want is already here.

Lynn Valley United Church is already a place for children youth and families – keep it that way

Lynn Valley United Church is already a place where all are welcome regardless of gender, financial circumstance, sexual orientation, age, race – set it

Lynn Valley United Church is already a place where spirits are nurtured, scripture is studied, hands are offered in healing, and justice is lived in relation to the earth – walk with us

In the end Jesus says that all prayer ends with the same result. We receive the Holy Spirit. When we ask, seek and knock, persistently, believing what we want has already come to pass, the result is a life of Spirit. We live attentively. We live in mindfulness and presence. We live expectantly. We live with gratitude. We live within the heart of God. Imagine – living the rest of your life within the heart of God. It’s yours for the making, truly.

Amen.