

It began as a suggestion at a worship committee meeting – Kevin Carpenter was there that evening – Donna Nugent, Lorrie Jones, Jean Carlson, Brenda Crout – I can't remember if anyone else was there. Someone asked if there was some way we could put up a board in the lobby on which people could write their prayer requests. Since that night we have all been seeing and hearing the outcome of that suggestion. You and I have been writing the names of those who face special challenges – sometimes writing our own names – asking one another to pray during worship and during the week. For some weeks following Easter I asked for prayers for my brother-in-law, Steve Kick, who was in intensive care for six weeks and who last weekend was able to drive to his son's wedding in Canada. Our whole family gives thanks for the recovery he has made thus far. I thank you for your prayers. I know that many others of you would like to give similar thanks.

Having said all of that I have a confession to make: When I worship in other congregations I find the long list of names being prayed for distracting – even irritating. Everywhere I go we are praying for Fred and Mary and Alice and Bob and Trevor and Charity and on and on. I wonder if anyone but God knows who all these people are. Will God do something for them just because their names are mentioned? If there are prayers for them in five churches rather than one do the odds of God's giving healing or help increase? If everyone concentrates during the prayers, praying with the one leading the prayers will it make a difference? Or is God going to do what God is going to do, regardless of our prayers?

I think of three women in the scriptures: Sarah, Hannah, and Mary. God granted each of them a special child. What role did their prayers play in this?

Well, Sarah had been barren for a lifetime. In her younger days surely she pleaded for a child but none was given. O, the Lord promised a son to Sarah but decades passed and only her slave had given birth to Abraham's child. Finally Sarah gave up hope. No, the scriptures do not tell us that but they do say that when the Lord told the

90 year old Sarah she would give birth to a son she laughed. And the Lord was offended. But the Lord had chosen her and the son, Isaac, was born.

Hannah was also barren. With crying and pleading she begged the Lord for a son – she was so extreme in her praying that the prophet Eli thought her drunk and berated her. But the Lord heard her pleading and gave her Samuel.

And then Mary. Mary was not asking to be a mother, she was not even married, only engaged. But the Lord chose her, sending the angel Gabriel to her to tell her that she would bear a son, the Son of God. Mary's first words were, "How can this be since I am a virgin?" and the angel told her the Holy Spirit would cause this child to be conceived. Then Mary said, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Three women – one having given up hope, another hoping and pleading, another still not even asking and God blessed each of them with a son. What should we learn? That you never can tell what God might do. Maybe God will hear thousands pleading and grant healing. Maybe no one at all will pray and God will act to heal. Maybe one beloved by God will receive no deliverance at all.

That's how it was with Mary's son. Those standing at the cross called out that he should ask God's deliverance, but of course he already had. Abba, Father, all things are possible for you, let this cup pass from me, but not what I want but what you want. This had been Jesus prayer before his arrest. The response to his prayer had been the sound of soldiers approaching.

Ask and you will receive, Jesus taught. Search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks, receives, everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks the door will be opened.

But not always as we ask.

Jesus desire that we bring all our concerns to God is clear. Jesus desire that we trust that we will receive all good things from God is clear. But God is still God. You and I are not God, Prayer is not power, but it is what Jesus wants you and I and the whole church to be doing. And so he teaches us to pray:

Father. As Luke tells it simply that: Father. A word of intimacy, closeness, a word coming from the family. Luther tells us that Jesus wants us to speak as children speak to their loving father.

Then Jesus teaches us to pray: Your kingdom come. Not my kingdom, my dreams but God's kingdom -- God ruling over every heart and life - especially over your heart and mine -- your words and deeds and mine. Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread. Not a prayer to win the lottery -- nor for security through a long retirement but enough bread for this day -- tomorrow we will need to pray again.

Forgive our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. Please don't remember how we fail you, Father -- bless us by enabling us to forgive others who fail us -- what they owe us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial. Jesus did not teach us to pray that we might be conquerors of every challenge but that we be saved from trials that could overwhelm us.

A simple prayer Jesus taught us but to it he added the invitation to ask, search, knock. And so we do. I like it when you tell your relationship to the person whose name you put on the board. Then I am not praying only for a name but for Aaron Chapin's friend, or Kristin Van Euwen's mother or as we did this spring for Miriam Riegelsberger's sister. Sometimes our prayers will bring rejoicing like the rejoicing of Hannah. Sometimes there will be the waiting of Sarah, sometimes the surprise of Mary. But Jesus himself is closest and nearest when prayers are answered as his was with the sound of soldiers boots, silence from the nursery, a final goodbye in this life. For he knows what it is to be raised from the dead. Sooner or later you will join him in that. Amen.