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The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Much More
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Sometimes, prayers really can lead to much more than we imagine. This is how the Living Compass Advent devotional was born. Some of you may remember, when I was serving as rector in a parish in Wisconsin, I was also working for the Episcopal ministry called Living Compass, which was started by an Episcopal priest. At the same time, I was also chaplain to a local chapter of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this organization of women in the Episcopal Church, it was founded by Emily Malbone Morgan in 1884 and has chapters all over the United States and India. Their headquarters are in Massachusetts, but local chapters meet wherever they are located. Thanks to technology, women who wish to become a member and don't live near a local chapter can be accommodated through groups that meet on video conference. This organization of women is committed to prayer, spiritual growth, and social justice. Notable members include educator, writer and activist Vida Scudder and Newberry award winning author Madeleine L'Engle.

One weekend after Easter, I had been asked to lead a retreat for the Companions – as they call themselves - which I enjoyed. The members must have enjoyed it too, because during the portion of the retreat where they conduct business, I was unanimously voted their chaplain, with no term limits. However, no one had asked me prior to the vote if this was something I could or wanted to commit to. Two of the requirements of the chaplain is serving as spiritual director for all the members and the retreat leader for all future retreats. Even though it had come about through enthusiastic admiration and love I had not been asked and was a little resentful of what I saw as a sudden increase in my responsibilities.

By the time Advent and a new church year drew near, I had explored ways to get out of this chaplaincy. I had talked with the president of the chapter and had even prayed for the members to have a change of heart, but nothing worked. So, when they informed me they were looking forward to the Advent retreat I grudgingly committed it to my calendar and secured a supply priest for my parish the Sunday of the retreat. While meeting with the Living Compass team, I mentioned the upcoming retreat, how I was dreading it, and asked if I could use Living Compass materials for it. I was given permission and that helped change my sour attitude a bit as I was engaged in a creative activity that I hoped would

benefit both Living Compass and the Companions. The results became the first Living Compass Advent devotional, which is still being updated and published. We usually give them out and provide links to the on-line version every year.

At the retreat, the devotional was well received by all but one person. While everyone else received the meditations and teachings with open minds and hearts, one woman, the wife of a priest, batted everything I offered back at me with bitterness and resentment. So, I was surprised when she came to me for spiritual direction.

When she came into the room, she walked with heavy footsteps, her face in a frown, her shoulders stooped. She sat down heavily on a chair. Then she told me about her prayer life, how she prayed the Daily Office from *the Book of Common Prayer* without fail like she had been doing her entire life and for reasons unknown, the words of the prayers no longer had any life or connection for her. She used the word *dry* to describe how her prayers felt. This had been going on for a little over two years. Her other spiritual director advised her to keep praying, keep persevering, because that is what Jesus said to do in today's Gospel and eventually, she would pray her way out of this dry spell. Only she wasn't. Instead, she noticed she was losing joy in other areas of her life. She wasn't ready to give up, but she was certainly frustrated.

Of all the instruction on prayer Jesus gave to his followers in today's Gospel, the bit about persevering even when it appears prayers are not being answered or doing us any good might be the most relatable. As from time to time, any of us can feel our prayers are not working or being heard. Jesus told a funny parable about a man banging on a friend's door in the middle of the night as a teaching about keeping at it, not giving up. The reason we don't give up, Jesus also taught, is because God is *not* like the friend snuggled in bed for the night who doesn't want to be bothered. God is never too busy nor too distracted for our prayer. God is **not** the father too obsessed with other things to listen to us. God is not the giver of punishment, but longs to give us the best God has, and one of the best things God has is the desire to be in relationship with us.

The trouble is, we tend to think about prayer as transactional, not relational. Even a young CS Lewis tried to bargain with God that if he was a good enough person God would spare his mother from cancer. When his mother died, Lewis rejected God's existence. Yet, as he describes in his wonderful book *Surprised by Joy*, God was not willing to reject him, and when he was surprised by

the truth of God's existence despite his rejection, Lewis became one of Christianity's followers with a deeper understanding of prayer and God.

God is not the preoccupied parent, nor is God too important to care. God is not a cosmic Santa Claus who grants our prayers based on merit. God is different from what we are used to. God is love and yearns to be in relationship with those God loves, and let's never forget that is you and me and everyone regardless of age, race, ability, socioeconomic status, and gender. This is how Jesus approached God in prayer. Throughout the Gospels, the one activity Jesus did more than any other, more than healing, more than teaching, more than telling parables, more than eating at someone's house, was praying. This is mentioned so frequently, it is easy to skip over it when we read the Gospel. For example, today's Gospel passage began not with Jesus' teaching, but with him praying. And when he prayed, Jesus didn't seem to be only praying to get what he wanted. Even Jesus had what we would call "unanswered prayers" or prayers where the answer was "no". Such as when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane to be spared suffering before his crucifixion, or his prayer on the cross that expressed feeling abandoned by God. So, why then, did Jesus pray?

The answer might be found if we go back to Jesus' teaching on how to pray, which is what his disciples asked. Jesus didn't mention praying for what we want. He gave an outline we probably recognize as the Lord's Prayer which praises God by acknowledging God's name is holy, asks for God's kingdom to come, a line that recognizes all the injustice and suffering in the world and asks for God to bring about the final realization of God's kingdom here on earth, which will put an end to all inequality and injustice. It asks for forgiveness and reminds us to forgive, which is one way God's kingdom becomes realized in our world. Of course, there is also the request for daily bread, recognizing what we have comes not from our own resourcefulness but from the grace of God. This prayer is so familiar even people who never go to church often recognize it and might even be able to recite parts of it. Based on a Jewish prayer, it has persisted for thousands of years and brings us back to the core of our faith every time we hear it or pray it. Which means prayer, in Jesus' teaching isn't one-sided, it is a way of connecting to God who longs to be in prayer with us.

But what happens when the person who prays no longer finds the connection they used to, despite their persistence? It is difficult not to become discouraged that despite praying the Lord's Prayer for thousands of years God's kingdom has not yet arrived, as the evidence of racism, sexism, agism, and all the

gun violence attest to. What happens when we knock and knock and the door not only stays closed, but starts to feel farther and farther away? What about the woman who came to me in frustration of a prayer life gone dry?

I shared with her that prayer can be much more than words in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Don't get me wrong, our prayer book is wonderful, and I admire it and respect and value it deeply. It is a powerful collection of prayers that also contains our history and beliefs and should not be discarded. If you turn to pages 856 – 857 you can read about prayer and types of prayer in the church. It is also not all there is, and there are more ways to connect with God. I shared with the woman times in my own life when situations like cleaning up after a flood that had compromised the church building and my apartment complex made it difficult to pray with words. Or the time – long before I was ordained - I lost my *Book of Common Prayer* and found prayers from other sources like the Christians in the Iona Community and in the *St. Augustine's Prayer Book* were actually just what I needed. Meditative prayers like the Rosary - there is an Episcopal version - deepened my connection with God and helped ease some teenage angst.

I reminded the woman of what Jesus said in today's Gospel, that we persevere because God wants to be close to us. That does not necessarily mean doing the same thing over and over for years when it doesn't help. I suggested perhaps she alone was not responsible for praying her way out of her dry spell, and that God may be inviting her to a different kind of prayer, at least for a while. After all God can connect and communicate with us in words, in music, in colors, even in silence. Let's not forget part of prayer is listening for God. I encouraged her to be creative with her prayer life.

Hours later, the same woman walked with a lighter step, her face less strained, as if a burden had been lifted from her. By the end of the retreat, she was smiling, relaxed, and no longer combative during the guided meditations and teachings I offered. When I saw her at Easter time, she was radiant with joy, the kind of joy that comes from being close to God.

I believe this connection is the *much more* Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. God is much more than the ideal parent we imagine and connecting with God means much more than getting what we want. Persevering in prayer doesn't mean mindless repetition, it means continuing to trust God is present and is looking forward to connecting with us even when we are distracted, or tired, or frustrated things aren't going our way. The much more is how God transformed my resentment into renewal for me, for a woman who

wanted to persevere in prayer but didn't know how, and for the ministry I was working with. That's much more goodness and life than I could have accomplished on my own, and a taste of God's kingdom here and now.

When you pray this week, however you pray, even if it has been a while since you have prayed, I hope you remember, there is *much more* to it, and that *much more*, is the stuff of God's kingdom.