

Jesus says "Pray always and don't lose heart." And then he tells a parable that seems to imply that if we persist and badger and ask enough, God will answer our prayers.

It looks like God can be talked into things, that we can wear God down and change God's mind.

But we know from our own experience that isn't always true. How many among us have prayed with all our hearts and with great persistence for something to not happen...and it happens anyway?

If we can't change God's mind, if we can't mold God's will to our own, why pray?

I want to start by saying I don't believe science can give us proof about our faith, but I think it can offer some interesting insight.

I read some research this week on what happens to our brains when we pray. Using MRI technology we can see what is going on in the human brain while people are praying. There's a group at the Univ. Of Pennsylvania that has been studying the effect of prayer on the brain for some time now.

One thing that happens consistently, is the frontal lobes light up, just like they do when people are having a conversation.... So prayer

stimulates the same areas in our brains as face to face conversation, which is really not all that surprising.

But something else happens that *is* surprising, the parietal lobes get quiet, they go dark. This is the part of our brain that takes our sensory information and uses it to create a sense of ourselves.... and then it orients the self to the world around it," So it's the part of our brain that focuses on and develops a sense of self. When we pray, that part of our brain shuts down, we begin to lose a sense of ourselves" and then we begin to feel a sense of oneness.

And when people lose their sense of self, when they feel a sense of oneness, it blurs the boundary between self and other.

Blurring that boundary develops an increased capacity to sense the suffering and misfortune of others. It develops our sense of compassion.

Our brains it turns out are like our muscles. When we exercise our muscles, they become stronger. It works the same way in our brains, they have a quality that's called neuroplasticity, and when we practice things like attention and compassion... just like we build muscle when we exercise...we increase our capacity to be attentive and compassionate. So what research confirms is that we can actually through prayer develop and continue to develop an increased capacity for compassion.

Of course I suspect Jesus already knows this when he counsels his disciples to pray always and not lose hope. I think he knows, that our prayer doesn't change God's mind, but it does change our minds.

So maybe the answer to my earlier question, "Why pray?" is that we pray to cultivate compassion. Because compassion creates a desire to be with people who we may otherwise see as a threat to our individual selves. And for us as Christians this is important because these are the very people who Luke describes as the focus of our Christian ministry: the poor, the undesirables, the outsiders of the world.

Luke 4:18

'The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed, the burdened, the battered free,

I think the act of prayer, is the opening of ourselves to God. It's the setting aside of our self and allowing the spirit of God to mold and form us. We open up a space for people and things we otherwise wouldn't be concerned about.

In Jeremiah God says "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts and they will be my people and I will be their God... So

when we pray we open ourselves up to receiving this gift that God so wants to write upon our hearts.

Some people say that God's spirit is always available to us. Former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says that God so wants to be in our lives that when we open ourselves in prayer God rushes in like a vacuum. That God fully senses the smallest gesture of our attention...just like in that noisy crowd when Jesus felt that small touch of his cloak...who was that?!, I felt someone's touch, someone's need.

Other people point out that at times God hides his face from us. Which makes me wonder then what is happening in those moments when we can't feel connected with God, when we try to connect with God but we feel lost and alone and abandoned.

Maybe this is where the idea of not losing hope comes in.

In those moments that we can't hear God, when we can't find God we hope that God is listening, we hope that God is writing god's self on our hearts, even when we can't feel anything.

Maybe not losing heart is believing that something is happening in that silence that we can't immediately recognize...is it possible that when we persevere in prayer and continue to hope that God continues to work in us through silence?

There is a part of this passage I find it a bit troubling...Jesus says "Listen to what the judge says" as if the judge has some wisdom to share with us.

“he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ “

It is interesting to notice in terms of what happens to our brains when we pray, that the unjust judge is so self-centered. He is described as someone who neither feared God nor had respect for people. His focus is entirely on self. In his judgment, he grants the widow what she asks not for her sake, but for his own sake, so he won't become worn out.

God's justice is unlike earthly justice. Earthly justice is concerned with carrying out earthly laws and their requisite rewards and punishments. God's justice is about making all things new, it's about tearing down systems of oppression and building up communities of grace and love and inclusion.

This is the kind of justice that we begin to desire when we allow God to write on our hearts. Simply allowing ourselves to be held in the presence of God teaches us to love others as God loves us.