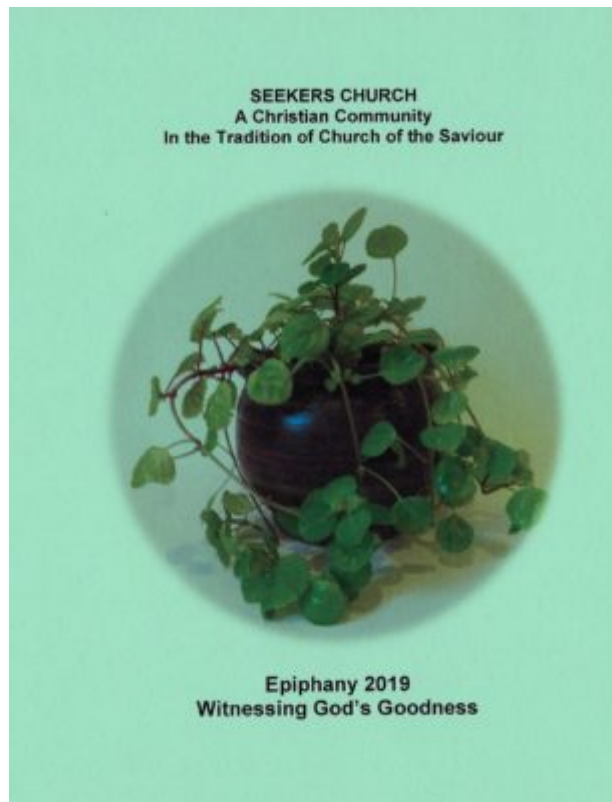


“The Power of Prayer” by Jacquie Wallen

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The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

This past year, my daughter and grandchildren and I spent Christmas in Florida. They drove. I flew. It works better that way. When I arrived at Dulles on my return flight, I went to the designated Arrivals gate to wait for the SuperShuttle, on which I had already reserved a seat. I had confirmed the seat with SuperShuttle by phone as I waited in line to leave the plane. When I confirmed, a recorded message suggested I download the phone app but I didn't see the point of that since I had made my reservation on my home computer, not my phone. I assumed the phone app wouldn't have a record of my reservation. Besides, having confirmed, I was all set.

After $\frac{1}{2}$ hour, I hadn't seen a trace of the SuperShuttle or any other shuttle, only private cars. Another woman was there who

had been waiting for about the same amount of time for a Lyft she had ordered, but it wasn't coming either. I called SuperShuttle again and waited for another $\frac{1}{2}$ hour before they put me through and then it was only to an announcement that it would be another 17 minutes before I could actually speak to an agent. Again, a recording said I could download a SuperShuttle app if I wanted it to go faster but I didn't, for the same reason as before. I decided to hang up and just keep waiting, assuming that if SuperShuttle was too busy to answer the phone, they must be way behind on their shuttles, too. After a total of about an hour-and-a-half waiting, though, I started to get very anxious and almost panicky. How was I going to get home? This was Dulles, in the distant land of Virginia! There weren't even any cabs! I found myself forming a little prayer to ask God for help but quickly reprimanded myself. After all, God is not a concierge service that we can use to summon a cab or a shuttle. By then, the woman who had been waiting for the Lyft was gone.

Finally, it struck me that I might as well try downloading the app that had been suggested on my phone. At least it would be something to do. I downloaded it onto my phone, and the app found my reservation instantly, using my phone number, and told me a shuttle was waiting for me at the lower level arrival gate #6. I was at the **upper** level arrival gate #6. I went downstairs and found my shuttle right away and was home in no time—there wasn't even much traffic.

It occurred to me that it might be fun to expand on what I learned from this experience but I couldn't immediately think of how I would do it or what I would do with whatever I came up with. When I got home, though, and checked my email I found that Michele had asked me to preach today. I looked up the gospel reading for today, which was in Luke, and found it contained the story about how, after Simon and some of the other disciples-to-be had been fishing all day without catching any fish, Jesus suggested they fish in a different

place, where the water was deeper. They complied and caught a huge load of fish. It's a story so like my Dulles experience that I knew I had to accept her offer and have named my sermon "The Power of Prayer."

My SuperShuttle experience at Dulles reinforced what I think about prayer. I basically believe that prayer produces results, not because of something God does but because of something we do when we pray.

- We put aside some of our fear, which allows us to think more clearly.
- We let go of our rigid grasp on the problem and open our minds to unexpected solutions.
- We calm down and free up our creative self to do its work and come up with a solution that our logical, inside-the-box thinking would never have produced.
- We open ourselves to God's will, letting go of our egotistical need to control the results of our prayer and admitting that none of our attempts to solve the problem have worked. Opening ourselves to God's will in the matter—not "my will be done..." but "thy will be done..." vastly expands the range of possible solutions.
- With our egoism more in check, we can be more compassionate and empathic and therefore more open to others' points of view.

I am a clinical social worker and I sometimes recommend prayer to psychotherapy clients who have not been able to make progress with seemingly impossible situations or intractable negative emotions. When I do, my clients sometimes balk, saying, "But I don't believe in God." I say, "It really doesn't matter. There may be a God and there may not be a God. We'll probably never know either way. But, without or without God, or a belief in God, prayer works."

Frank Schaeffer, son of the evangelical preacher and teacher Francis Schaeffer, has let go of his fundamentalist

background, joined the Greek Orthodox Church, and become a liberal, or even progressive, Christian. Among the many books he has written, one is called *Why I am an Atheist Who Believes in God*. In his book, he says "I say the Nicene Creed." He continues:

I say the words "I believe" this and that I say these words in good conscience, because saying I believe in God is not the same as saying I know that these words mean. I don't. Words fall short. I don't know what words such as "Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" mean. Then again, I don't know what the words "I love you, Genie (his wife) mean either. I say those words with all sincerity, too, but also in blind ignorance of their ultimate meaning

The words of the Creed and my words of love are metaphors for something that is ultimately indescribable but ever present and never perfect. What I know is that whatever the Creed means, I have been overwhelmed by love. I have seen "Light of Light" in action, felt its power while not understanding from whence the light pours into me.

I told about my Dulles SuperShuttle experience in a spiritual report and Marjory Bankson, to whom I submit my reports, commented: "Your experience seems to be the stepping stone into seeing your life in this larger benevolent web of reality we call God." I like that. I think that is what Frank Schaeffer is saying. This larger benevolent reality we call God. And we can create experiences for ourselves, such as prayer, meditation, love, or forgiveness that allow us to connect to that larger benevolent reality. Prayer is one powerful way of connecting to that larger benevolent web of reality; of witnessing God's goodness. Years ago, in a comment on an earlier spiritual report of mine, Marjory referred to prayer as: "A personal relationship with an impersonal force." That is kind of how I experience God.

Let me give you another personal example. I have had the same newspaper delivery person for the past 6 years. There are three people on my floor who have the Washington Post delivered in the morning and I am the farthest from the elevator. Every morning the other two subscribers receive their papers right in front of their doors. Even though I am just one door farther from the elevator than my neighbor on the left, who always finds her paper in front of her door, my paper is typically delivered in the middle of the hall, ten to twenty feet from my door, never in exactly the same place. I have complained to the circulation desk multiple times but it has had no effect on the newspaper placement. The delivery person is just unwilling to walk the few extra feet that it would take to get the paper in front of my door. Last Christmas, when the delivery person was soliciting tips by putting self-addressed envelopes in our papers, I wrote a note that said "If you start delivering my paper right in front of my door rather than up and down the middle of the hall, I will tip you." For several days, the paper was delivered right in front of my door and I sent a decent tip. After I sent the tip, the paper went right back to being delivered up and down the middle of the hall. Every morning when I went out to pick up the paper, I would become furious, which, to me, is a very uncomfortable feeling that I don't like to have. I decided to use prayer in a way suggested by the Twelve-step programs such as AA and AlAnon. As recommended by these programs, I prayed for the delivery person—that they might have all the blessings I might wish for myself: good health, peace of mind, prosperity, good friends, loving family, etc. After a few weeks of this, I was no longer angry when I looked up and down the hall for my paper. I did not resent having to take the extra steps that the delivery person wouldn't take. In fact, I started to see the whole thing as kind of funny—a nonproblem. I felt so much better. I started to get rather fond of my delivery person, who I have never actually seen. I mostly don't need to pray for the delivery person any more, and I am still happy to have a paper delivered to my hallway,

not matter how far away it lands. I often find the placement of the paper rather amusing (like a few days ago when it was delivered to my across-the-hall neighbor's door). "Silly delivery person," I say to myself, affectionately.

When I tell people this story they will often ask: "So, did he ever start delivering the paper in front of the door?" I say "No, but that's not the point. The problem went away. So did my bad feelings. That was the answer to my prayer." Did God do that? I have no idea. But acting "as if" there were a God certainly did it.

There is a new, developing field of scientific study called "Neurotheology." Neurotheology studies the relationship between religious experience and the neurology of the brain. It turns out that many spiritual practices, including prayer and meditation, produce measurable changes in brain chemistry and brain activity. These changes are related to the coordination of breathing with the heartbeat, reduction in stress hormones, increase in levels of the hormones that improve brain functioning, positive mood, boosted immune system functioning, reduction of anxiety, increased pain tolerance, and enhancement of self-esteem. The spiritual component is important. Spiritual meditation, for example, promotes more positive changes than nonspiritual, or secular, meditation.

Divine intervention? Self-hypnosis? Placebo effect? Who knows? Does it really matter? I don't know that, either.

I am going to conclude by reading a prayer by Rumi called "Prayer is an Egg:" *[The full text of Rumi's poem/prayer may be found at <http://mondaypoem.blogspot.com/2010/03/hello-poets-its-spring-spade-stands.html>]*