

Prayer, Interrelatedness, and God's Passibility

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I define the traditional understanding of the typical petitionary prayer as talking to God and asking God to love in a specific manner in which God was not doing so beforehand. As you know, I do think people should be encouraged to share their hearts with God. However, I do not take much stock in the effectiveness of petitionary prayer for loved ones from a distance, whether by individuals or churches (unless the prayers change the ones who are praying and inspire them to conspire with God to be God's hands and feet for the people or situations prayed for).

And, it is about effectiveness. Isn't it? Unlike other forms of prayer, petitionary prayers are meant to accomplish something. They are meant to move/inspire/encourage/empower or whatever word you want to use that gets God to increase God's love in someone's life or in a situation needing God's grace.

As you also know, I think petitionary prayer—trying to get God to increase God's love and healing for others in some manner—contributes to more suffering in the world. Why? Because it tends to relinquish responsibility to God (Bystander Effect). Prayers for basic needs such as more love, more peace, less violence, healing from injury or illness, salvation, the eradication of hunger and poverty, and the healing of our planet are already a “Yes and Amen” to God.

The typical petitionary prayer also makes God look like an unfair autocrat who can instantly snap his fingers to make things happen (who supposedly sometimes does and many times chooses not to). Lastly, according to the empirical data (including a 2.5 million dollar study), petitionary prayer is ineffective (check out a summary of the research here:

<https://secularhumanism.org/2018/12/have-christians-accepted-the-scientific-conclusion-that-god-does-not-answer-intercessory-prayer/>).

Recently, I have had a few wonderful conversations with process and relational theology folks who agree that God's love is uncontrolling. They also agree that God loves the utmost in each moment while at times being constrained by the freedom and boundaries of creatures big and small. However, many process folks still want to hold to petitionary prayer being effective to some degree. Why? Because they say we are all interrelated and everything we do has an effect, including prayer. To talk about how those effects can occur, they use terms like *quantum entanglement*, *energies of transformation*, *chaos theory*, and the *butterfly effect*. Additionally, they say because God is passible, God can be affected by our prayers (passible makes possible—prayer can have an effect on God, thus increasing God's love in the person's life we are praying for).

For example, in her discussion of intercessory prayer, famous process theologian Marjorie Suchocki writes in her book *In God's Presence*: “[Prayer] changes what God can offer.... releasing more of the divine resources toward the good that God can then use.... Praying for another's wellbeing allows God to weave us into the other's well-being.”

Bruce Epperly, another brilliant process theologian, for example, writes in his book *Praying with Process Theology*: “Our prayers open us and others to greater movements, possibilities, and energies of transformation in the God-world relationship, specifically involving those situations for whom I pray.”

Kathleen Fischer, author on spirituality and faith, writes in her book *Reclaiming the Connections*, that our prayers “insert new love and strength into the situation of the person we are praying for, and they are received by God and become a real factor in God’s ongoing guidance of the world.”

Finally, theologian and minister Philip Clements-Jewery in his book *Intercessory Prayer*, writes: “God thus uses our prayers for others to make available to them an aim that has a stronger likelihood of being accepted and actualized by them than would be the case if the prayer had not been made, although they remain free to realize or not realize the aim.”

While I am sympathetic to these views, I simply do not have enough faith to trust them wholeheartedly. I am doubtful that talking to the wisest, most powerful, and most loving God who is doing all She can to maximize good and minimize evil, will increase her unilateral provision and power to supply for the basic needs of others. And, despite the interrelationship of all events, mental and otherwise, I am not convinced that we can be confident that the effects of prayer (talking to God) have direct effects on the persons being prayed for. I am open to the possibility, but, for many reasons, the otherworldly nature of these theopoetics is not convincing.

Let’s try a thought experiment:

Larry prays in his room for his relatives who are in different states:

“God, please heal Aunt Mary of her cancer.”

Then he immediately prays:

“God, please heal Uncle John of his anger problems, homophobia, and distance toward you”.

Does Interrelationship Correlate to Direct Relationship with Persons Prayed For?

The assumption from some process folks is that when we pray, for example, for Uncle John to be healed, that due to the interrelationships of all events, mental and otherwise, that the interrelated effects of praying, “God, please heal Uncle John,” can be experienced by Uncle John. Then when we move from Uncle John, to immediately praying for Aunt Mary, “God, please heal Aunt Mary from her cancer,” it is suggested that Mary can potentially experience the effects. Changing the name of the person being prayed for, miraculously (or magically), instantaneously changes the direction of the effects. Of course, the effects may not reach the intended recipients due to other variables that may oppose them.

It seems that in this view, prayers are like an energy gun. We can aim the gun at whomever we choose by just saying their name. Then by sharing with God a desire for assistance, it becomes a blast of healing energy. There can be a problem though. While the prayers could instantly head in the direction of the intended target, the burst of energy could be blocked. It reminded me when an energy blast was directed toward Wonder Woman in her movie, but she blocked it with her shield. While the energy was directed at her, it was prevented from touching and harming her (I guess that is how it works).

But, isn't the above thought a faulty premise? Is that Whiteheadian or just magical thinking?

“There is power in prayer because we are all quantumly connected and interrelated!!”

It seems that it is misleading for process folks to stop at interrelatedness. For all we know, from a process theology perspective, a dog barking in Aunt Mary's neighborhood could have a more significant effect on her than prayers for her thousands of miles away (perhaps the dog keeps her up at night, reducing her sleep, thereby reducing healing because of the lack of restorative effects of sleep).

Yes, we are interrelated. Every action has a reaction. Every event, even mental, affects something else. The speech act in the prayers above do affect something. But, what? Perhaps, the temperature in the room? Maybe an effect on the one who is praying, inspiring them to love in practical ways? Perhaps the plant growth in the room or a plant directly outside due to exhaling more carbon dioxide? A storm three months later in Guatemala? Who really knows? It would seem, absolutely no one. Therefore, while God can express love in new ways as circumstances change, we cannot be sure that prayer changes the circumstances that directly involve the person being prayed for.

For me, it seems like magical thinking and a substantial intellectually dishonest leap to assume mentioning Uncle John's name in prayer, and then, for example, immediately mentioning my Aunt Mary in prayer, that their interrelationship effects must absolutely correspond to the one whose name is mentioned in the speech act (Aunt Mary or Uncle John). That would be like suggesting we can be confident that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can cause children somewhere in America to have hiccups. Is it bizarrely possible? Sure. But it seems extremely unlikely.

In a recent conversation with a prominent process and relational theologian, they told me:

“I don't think our prayer increases God's love. I think God always loves to the utmost. But because I think we live in an interrelated world, our "action at a distance" might affect the causal matrix of the universe in ways that God could use to work with Aunt Mary's cells, etc. to heal her.”

But, at the end of the day, due to prayer and the causal matrix, and God's interaction with those new changes in the matrix, they are suggesting God's love would be increased. If talking to God and mentioning Aunt Mary's name in prayer along with a desire for her to be healed affected the causal matrix in some manner that contributed to the healing of her cells, then at the end of the day, that is an obvious increase in God's love. Prayer ultimately equals healing, which equals more of God's love. And, once again, yes, we do live in an interrelated world. But, causality is chaotic. There are some relationships we can map out and most that we cannot. Sure, perhaps we can say that praying, "God, please heal Aunt Mary" in our room while she is thousands of miles away "might" affect Aunt Mary's cells in her body, but, let's be honest, that is like suggesting praying to God, "God, please let it rain tomorrow for my plants in my garden are dying," could affect the causal matrix of the universe in ways that God could work with molecules to cause precipitation. I am just not sure that is how it works with us Muggles.

We can start to see the Harry Potterish sensibilities when thinking about the inverse. Would people who take our interrelatedness seriously, and posit prayers and thoughts about someone could increase healing effects, suggest that when a person has negative thoughts about someone hundreds of miles away, that it could cause the person harm? Can you imagine a religious guru saying, "If a person smokes and thinks terrible things about their boss who lives a few towns over, it can contribute to the boss getting cancer." That does seem preposterous. Okay. Forget about "seem". That IS preposterous. That is a clear example of magical thinking with absolutely no basis in reality.

So, in theory, process theologians may be correct—every action has a reaction and has an effect. Additionally, those effects can get wondrous and tricky on a quantum level. And perhaps that can be God's sweet spot to perform miracles so as not to defy lawlike regularities. But, given the interrelatedness of all things, and if there is such a thing as quantum entanglement, how can we be so sure what event, act, element, particle, or person, is entangled with some other event, act, element, particle, or person? We just can't. In other words, why should we assume that a passionate mental or verbal speech act would be experienced by the person named? It seems one can espouse the interrelatedness of all things and hold to the view that passionate, heartfelt speech, and/or mental acts (prayer) do have some effects in the world, but that the probability of having direct effects to the person named in them, is slim to none (at the very least, we can say that empirically).

Do we want to inspire and wow people by talking about prayer and then using the MacGuffins of esoteric words like "Quantum Entanglement," "Chaos Theory," and "The Butterfly Effect," and continue to perpetuate superstitious beliefs? Let's face it, if talking to God about others to be healed is such a powerful practice, and apparently the more the merrier, and we can be confident that the greater number of people praying equals a greater number of energies of transformation (whatever those are), then how did that work out for the precious and brilliant world changer Rachel Held Evans (one of many examples)? She literally had thousands of people praying for her. Then add those prayers to the number of times those prayerful people thought about her and prayed for her. Perhaps, tens of thousands of thoughts and prayers did absolutely nothing to restore her brain functioning to keep her alive.

Even if we buy into quantum mechanics, which many contemporary practitioners of prayer emphasize, and we accept that weird things happen on a subatomic level; even if we hold that consciousness is not bound by our tiny brains and we are all interconnected and entangled in some vast web of energetic consciousness; even if we believe these things, there is no substantial evidence that thoughts, spoken or unspoken, can affect the outcome of events in any demonstrable way. When it comes to natural disasters, social injustice, and loved ones in crises, even if “prayer works,” on a quantum level, since its workings are most likely small and slow, sending good thoughts or talking to God (prayer) may not be all that is needed to bring forth a greater degree of shalom. The immediacy of many dire situations demands more than what the snail’s pace butterfly effect of good intentions, loving vibes, and ten-second prayers can offer.

Wouldn’t it be fair to say that our prayers from a distance for sick or desperate people would most likely not increase healing in their lives precisely due to the randomness of chaos theory? David Wilkinson, an advocate of petitionary prayer, writing about the unpredictability of the quantum world states, “It is a world that is unpicturable, uncertain, and in which the cause of events cannot be fully specified.” Therefore, to suggest so confidently that talking to God in one’s room would, or hypothetically, could, be effective, even if to a small degree, is confidence misplaced. It is basically taking the “chaos” out of chaos theory. You might as well call it “chaos certainty theory”.

Therefore, shouldn’t process and relational thinkers discuss the low probability of petitionary prayer’s effectiveness and emphasize the “chaos” in chaos theory, as opposed to making absolute claims that sounds inspirational but are mere fluff and mirages? While not pastorally inspiring, wouldn’t the above be more truthful than telling people if they rub the rabbit foot long enough (talk to God), and get more people to join in, then God can release a greater amount of energies of transformation upon/within their lives. With such a low success rate, wouldn’t it be likened to a snake-oil salesperson giving people inspirational false hope with their concoctions to make people feel better?

At the very least, when a process and relationally minded person is talking about the effectiveness of petitionary prayer, which some seem to do with absolute confidence, shouldn’t they do so with humility? For example, how can Kathleen Fischer emphatically state that prayers, “insert new love and strength into the situation of the person we are praying for.” From a process and relational perspective, we simply cannot make such a confident claim. It is not even enough to say they “might” “insert new love . . .”. Why? Because, is it really fair to say “might” when we could be talking about a 3 percent chance? Or, a 0 percent? What evidence would they even have to assume talking to God works that way (certainly not empirical evidence)?

Shouldn’t teachers on prayer be wary of wowing people with big words, especially when they don’t fully understand the complex physics of the topics being discussed (some physicists can’t even fully grasp theories like *quantum entanglement* and *chaos theory*)? And, shouldn’t we aim for truthfulness and clarity on this matter? And, if there are more effective ways to pray petitionary prayers for the lost, broken, and hurting (ex. conspiring prayer or other models), then wouldn’t we want to emphasize those? Isn’t the cost too high for metaphysical beliefs teetering on magical beliefs, or at least exaggerative metaphysical claims we cannot be sure about,

especially when we are dealing with life and death issues? Do we really want to gamble on “thoughts and prayers” with such things as violence, poverty, racism, pollution, homophobia, addictions, mental illness, sickness, and all the other tragic issues people are faced with on a daily basis?

Does God’s Passibility Correlate to An Increase of God’s Love for the Person Prayed For?

Various theologians that champion God’s uncontrolling love have an underlying assumption regarding the mechanics of prayer and its ability to increase God’s provision for basic needs. They believe God feels what we feel in prayer and is therefore changed because of our prayers. The experience changes God to such an extent that it increases God’s loving energy and activity toward fulfilling people’s basic needs. They believe our prayers change God and then expand his loving energies of transformation into the lives of the people we are praying for. Is this accurate, or is it wishful thinking? How does talking to God change God in this way? It assumes that God’s ability to feel the depths of the prayerful person’s experience necessitates an increase in God’s active love. I can see how this might happen with people, but it is difficult to comprehend when it comes to God.

One day, while watching television, I saw starving children in pain. They were desperately yearning for a mouthful of food. A passionate spokesperson came on the screen asking for money. My heartstrings were pulled. The experience moved me, and I felt a greater urgency to help fulfill their request. On another occasion, I was with parents who pleaded for therapeutic support for their struggling children. I felt their hurt and desperation. I cried with them. Their suffering moved me to want to help them. Witnessing the suffering of others and hearing their stories can change us. It can stir us toward loving compassion and increase our loving action. However, we can’t assume that God has a similar experience with us when we pray.

Certainly, our experiences and passionate prayers move God deeply. God changes in the sense of experiencing the present moment fully. Our pain becomes God’s pain. Our cares become God’s cares. But does God feeling what we feel increase God’s loving activity in the world?

Unlike God, I was not aware of the children’s hunger or the family’s plight. Therefore, I did not help them until after I found out about their anguish. God knows all and always performs the most loving act possible in every moment. Since impulses and feelings arise in our implicit nervous system before they become conscious, God knowing all that can be known perceives our requests before we ask them. God is already present with the person or situation we are praying for and loves them in ways we cannot comprehend.

Let me illustrate my concern about praying for others’ basic needs with one more story about a rambunctious seven-year-old named Shane, who was in need of his parent’s loving care. A friendly neighbor was watching Shane one day after school while his parents were at work. Her own son and Shane were in the back yard, playing on the swings. Fooling around and swinging dangerously high, Shane fell off the swing. As a consequence, he scraped his arm badly, bruised his leg, and was filthy from the damp dirt.

When the neighbor called to explain what had happened, Shane's mom asked if the neighbor had called her husband yet. Yes, the neighbor replied, but her husband was not answering his phone. Shane's mom then called her husband, but couldn't reach him either. A self-described helicopter mom, she drove frantically to the neighbor's house, which was thirty minutes away. While driving, she called her husband again. He finally answered, and she anxiously told him the situation.

"He fell and hurt his leg and arm," she said. "I hope he is okay. Where are you? Are you close to him? Please, if you get there first, take care of him. Okay?"

The husband told her calmly, "I am with Shane. I'm taking care of him. I know you're upset. I know you're concerned. It will be okay. I'm cleaning him up right now. I'll see you when you get here, and we can take care of him together." The mother arrived ten minutes later and helped her husband take care of Shane.

When Shane's mother spoke to her husband on the phone, did she relay any information to him that he did not already know? No. Did she share information with him that helped him take care of their son? No. Did her information inspire him, move him, motivate him, or empower him to actively love Shane more? No. Did her husband lovingly listen to his wife? Yes. Did her husband share her concern? Yes. Did her husband appreciate his wife's help when she arrived? Yes.

God cherishes our desire to talk with him about loved ones who are hurting. God loves when we join him in what he is doing in the world. It signifies trust. It shows that we value our relationship with him, that we are God-reliant as opposed to self-reliant. On the other hand, to share our concerns believing they will increase God's motivation and power to love, heal, and comfort is wishful thinking.

God might feel our pain and desperation while praying for another, but that does not mean our prayers inform him of something he didn't know beforehand. God's empathy does not mean that our prayers are like gasoline, fueling the fire of God's love, making it hotter and spreading it further. Or does it? God is not like a reluctant superhero who holds back his superpower of love until something tragic happens, which then causes him to fully embrace his loving, non-coercive power and moves him to lovingly save the day. Our prayers move God because God is relational. That our prayers motivate God or somehow expand his love in the lives of those who are desperate for shalom is something I struggle to believe.

Would a person's tears falling into a vast ocean make the water wetter? Would they increase the power of the ocean's currents? Would the tears increase the mass and volume of the ocean? Perhaps; perhaps not. If they did, the extent would be minuscule. Praying to God for intimacy's sake is deeply rewarding (for individuals and communities). Both God and we are mutually enriched as we experience the delight of a heart-to-heart connection. It is doubtful that praying to God and believing that our prayers are effective in increasing the vastness of God's loving power and his capacity to change other people and events in our shalom-starved world will actually make them so.

Part of my skepticism regarding the power of petitionary prayer for meeting basic needs is not based on God's character but on dynamics and agencies outside of his control. The gap between the vision of shalom that people are praying for and the undesirable circumstance they or others experience is not due to God's lack of loving desire or activity. While God always loves to the greatest extent possible, God is not in control of everything and everybody. God needs open doors. God has chosen to work alongside other entities and agencies in the world, such as people, randomness, and lawlike regularities, to accomplish his will.

Conclusion

Petitionary prayer for others cannot be an opiate lulling us to lazy living. We must no longer allow it to become an obstacle to what God longs to accomplish in the world. We can no longer behold human subjugation, oppression, and atrocities believing, "God is in control and he will take care of it if we just pray harder, louder, and with as much people as possible." The intermittent reinforcement of the occasional miracle supposedly brought about by prayer and the unknowing engagement in the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy ("Since event Y followed event X, event Y must have been caused by event X"), continues to sustain such a practice.

The reality is, atheists in predominantly atheistic countries, without Christians specifically praying for them, experience miracles without prayer. Their cancer instantly goes into remission. They remarkably recover from depression and addictions. They survive accidents and fires. They receive rent money at the last minute. They reconcile with estranged family members. They experience all of the "miracles" that Christians claim occurred through "prayer" but without the prayer. Now, that doesn't mean I don't think God was not involved in all of the blessings and miracles atheists experience. God, as a virtuoso of love is always on the move. I am just stating that I don't think they came about because of petitionary prayer. The birds do not pray, but a loving God takes care of them (Matthew 6:26). The lilies do not intercede, yet God is mindful of them (Matthew 6:28). Enemies and persecutors of God do not pray, but God loves them (Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27). The ungrateful and wicked do not pray, yet God is kind to them (Luke 6:35). God "so loved the world" without the prompting of prayer (John 3:16).

But, our understanding of prayer is changing.

The evils, systemic injustices, and everyday sufferings in this world deserve truthful light bearers and lovers of the Divine. The time and energy spent praying to God and believing that he will take care of it all by himself, or believing that we could shoot quantum bullets of healing across time and space to heal others, could be used to mobilize Spirit-empowered/led people of faith to take risks and love practically. Once we realize God does not solve our problems alone and invites cooperation, we can drench ourselves in God's love as individuals and communities, dive heart-first into the world's blistering traumas, and expand God's empire of shalom across the earth.

Let me end with this food for thought. If we are caught in a dangerous hurricane and flooding, and are about to drown in a car, do we want to rely on chaos theory and saints "thoughts and prayers?" Or, do we want to rely on thoughtful and prayerful people?