

Bothering God

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [March 24, 1999](#) issue

I have a seven-year-old granddaughter by marriage named Madeline. She is blond, skinny and tall for her age. When she comes to visit, we cook together. Our most successful dishes to date have been mashed sweet potatoes with lots of butter and crescent dinner rolls made from scratch. From the day Madeline was born, we have been able to look each other straight in the eye with no sentimentality whatsoever. The tartness of our love for one another continues to surprise me. It is easy to forget she is seven years old.

My first indication that there might be gaps in her religious education came several years ago, when her mother, her grandfather and I joined hands around the dinner table and bowed our heads to pray. "Why is granddaddy talking with his eyes shut?" Madeline asked. "Just be quiet and listen," her mother said, which was not a bad introduction to prayer.

Last May when she came to celebrate her birthday it was just the four of us again. Dressed in her favorite blue bell-bottoms, Madeline watched the candles on her cake burn down while we sang to her. Then she leaned over to blow them out without making a wish.

"Aren't you going to make a wish?" her mother asked.

"You have to make a wish," her grandfather said. Madeline looked as if someone had just run over her cat.

"I don't know why I keep doing this," she said to no one in particular.

"Doing what?" I asked.

"This wishing thing," she said, looking at the empty chair at the table. "Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy would get back together . . ."

"That's not going to happen," her mother said, "so don't waste your wish on that."

"I know it's not going to happen," Madeline said, "so why do I keep doing this?" No one answered her. It would have been insulting, under the circumstances, since her question was better than any response we could have given her. Why do any of us keep wishing for things we know won't happen? Why do we keep tossing the coins of our hearts' desires into pools of still water that swallow them up without a sound?

If I had been prepared, I might have said something inspired about the difference between wishing and prayer, but I was not prepared. When I talk to Madeline about prayer, I want to make sure I tell her the truth about what she can expect. I want to say something she can test for herself, about how God loves her and listens to her, but in that case I will need a ready explanation for why it does not always seem so.

I think I will skip the usual stuff about how no is a valid answer to prayer. As true as that may be, it sounds stingy to me. Even Jesus thought it sounded stingy. "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?" (Matt. 7:9). I also think I will stay away from the stuff about how she should only ask for what accords with God's will. "Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you" (Mark 11:23). Surely there are prayer requests more central to God's will than rearranging the landscape.

What I want Madeline to know is that the best thing about prayer is the relationship itself. Whether or not she gets what she asks for, I want her to keep asking. I want her to pester God the same way she pesters her mother, thinking of 12 different ways to plead her case. I want her to long for God the same way she longs for her father, holding fast to him even when his chair is empty.

When she complains that none of this does any good, I am going to ask her to tell me the difference between how she feels while she is praying versus how she feels when she thinks about giving up. If I am lucky, she is going to tell me that she feels more alive when she is praying, and that is when I will tell her the story about the persistent widow-that loud-mouthed woman who bothered the unjust judge until he gave her what she wanted. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" Jesus asks his disciples at the end of that story. "Will he delay long in helping them?" (Luke 18:7).

Well, yes, he might. I am willing to concede that much. But there is more to prayer than the answer to prayer. There is also the pray-er, who is shaped by the praying.

What the persistent widow knows is that the most important time to pray is when your prayers seem meaningless. If you do not go yell under the judge's window, what are you going to do? Take to your bed with a box of Kleenex? Forget what matters to you altogether? No. Every day of your life, you are going to get up, wash your face, and go ask for what you want. You are going to trust the process, regardless of what comes of it, because the process itself gives you life.

One day, when Madeline asks me outright whether prayer really works, I am going to say, "Oh, sweetie, of course it does. It keeps our hearts chasing after God's heart. It's how we bother God, and how God bothers us back. There's nothing that works any better than that."