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A few weeks ago, I showed the children here at church my first cell phone, with someone suggesting it looked like a walkie-talkie. That conversation got me thinking about how much our communication systems have changed through the years. Staci hung an antique wall phone in our basement—the one with the phone handle hanging from the side and large bells at the top that would ring when receiving a call. It doesn't work anymore, but it's an interesting piece of history.

Many of us grew up with rotary phones, when you would actually have to rotate the dial on the phone and watch it spin with each number. How many of you remember party lines when multiple households shared the same phone line? You could pick up the phone and listen to the neighbor's conversation as you waited to make your call. I thought it was so cool when we got our first push-button phone, and then I felt the communication age had reached its pinnacle when I bought my first cordless phone. I could walk around the house

while having a phone conversation, but if I wandered too far the call would disconnect.

Now we have mobile phones, no longer limited by the range of the landline bases still attached to cords, but able to wander almost anywhere and keep talking. That is—until we switch cell towers or drive out of range with the bars indicating signal strength become fewer and fewer.

Imagine what our prayer life would be like if based on the signal strength indicated by prayer bar lines. If we were out of range with no bars, it would be as if our prayers would do no good when getting lost out in the middle of nowhere. Or if a nearby prayer tower had problems due to a storm, an entire community could be cut off from God in the midst of a community disaster.

Even though the writer of Hebrews had no cell phone, he seemed to suggest that we have full bars of communication with God through Jesus, whom the writer called a great high priest. We Disciples aren't used to calling our religious leaders a priest, so we have a hard time relating to this role. The

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high priest during biblical times offered the sacrifice of animals in the innermost part of the temple, a sacred area no one else could enter. The priest had to cleanse himself and offer a sacrifice for his own sins, and then he would offer a sacrifice on behalf of others. In a sense, he was a mediator between the people and God, the only one who could enter the inner Holy of Holies and appeal to God for forgiveness. The author of Hebrews used this imagery of a priest to refer to Jesus, the one who suffered and died so that we can approach God directly rather than offer animal sacrifices.

We modern listeners have a hard time understanding this concept of animal sacrifice carried out by a high priest on behalf of everyone else, for we've learned we can speak directly to God with boldness without shedding animal blood. We know we have direct communication to God, but sometimes we may still wonder if our signal strength has full bars.

Have you ever had a time when you wondered if anyone has heard your prayers? Even though prayer

is simply the act of having a conversation with God, I imagine each of us has wondered if we're using the right words. Have you ever questioned how honest you can be with God about your raw emotions of anger and frustration?

I recall a time in my 20s when I lost my job due to someone accusing me of something I had not done. I was lost. Confused. Scared. One evening after Bible study I went into the sanctuary of the church I attended and just sat there, unsure of what to say. I began to complain, yelling at God for allowing such an event to happen to me. I stomped my feet. I begged for an immediate answer of what to do. I cried out, "Why"?

I didn't get an immediate reply. No telegram or special delivery answer. Just the passage of time as I became aware of new opportunities. Somehow in the mixture of confusion I began to discern a direction, a new course in life, and I enrolled at Christian Theological Seminary to explore the idea of ministry.

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I sensed that God was present in the mixture of my fear and uncertainty. The author of Hebrews would suggest that Jesus understood the struggle since he himself had gone through chaos. The author wrote that “Christ offered prayers and requests with loud cries and tears as his sacrifices to the one who was able to save him from death” (5:7, CEB).

Just as Jesus cried out to God, we can offer our prayers to God, knowing that we have full bars and that God will hear us. Thank goodness God doesn't put us on hold or send us to voicemail, for imagine what it would be like if God had an answering machine:

*Hello. This is God. Sorry I can't answer your prayer right now. I'm probably off in another part of the universe. Maybe a black hole or dark matter interferes with our prayer reception. If you wish to leave a message, lament once for a crisis, sing alleluia twice for a joy, and say please three times for a request. For complaints, direct your prayer to the particular heavenly department of your concern. Thank you and have a blessed day.*

We can give thanks that God always hears our prayer, and often, we make requests in our prayers for ourselves, our family, and our friends. Occasionally we may offer prayers for situations in other parts of the world, such as those who have lost loved ones in the recent mass shootings or those affected by natural disasters. It's more difficult, however, to follow Jesus' suggestion to pray for our enemies and love those who persecute us.

Late Disciples preacher Fred Craddock tells of a time he was in a prayer group when someone offered prayers for what appeared to be the enemy.

After the declaration of war by President Bush in what we called the Gulf War, some of us Christians in Atlanta had gathered for prayer. We had songs, we had scripture, we had prayer, and then songs, and scripture, and prayer. For a long time. There was seated next to me a young man, I think about seventeen or eighteen, might have been a freshman at the university, I don't know. In the course of the sentence prayers, he asked that God be with the women and the children in Iraq who would be hurt and killed in the war.

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When it was over, a man in his mid-fifties came over to that young man and said, “Are you on Saddam's side?”

He said, “Uh, no sir.”

“Well, you're praying for the wrong people.”<sup>1</sup>

The wrong people? When it comes to Jesus being our high priest, I don't think there are wrong people. Jesus encountered our weaknesses and our struggles, our pains and our shortcomings. He experienced firsthand the challenges of life, and he had conversations with those who were considered outcasts and unworthy. Although society and leaders considered them the wrong people, Jesus heard their voices.

Sometimes we have a hard time hearing one another's voices, even today, especially when we encounter difficult issues. A group of youth brought to the General Assembly of our church several weeks ago a resolution that encourages us to listen to one another:

**WHEREAS**, we all share a common humanity; and...

**WHEREAS**, when discussing difficult issues, all voices need to be heard; and...

**WHEREAS**, current disagreements over issues such as gun control, immigration, health care, and civil rights, are particularly divisive, with people not listening to one another...

**THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED** that the General Assembly...call upon the many expressions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to be a safe place to have difficult conversations; and

**FINALLY, BE IT RESOLVED** that the church be called to Hear and Listen to all voices present as we respect our brothers and sisters in faith, free of judgement and preconceived notions, recognizing and accepting our common humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Through Jesus we know that God has full bars to always hear us. Maybe we could do so likewise and have full bars for one another, even when it's difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories* (Kindle Locations 1877-1881). Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> <https://ga.disciples.org/resolutions/2019/ga-1926/>