

7 April 2019

More Than Words: So What Is Prayer?

Mark 14:32-42

Our scripture today is Mark's account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. We read from the Gospel of Mark chapter 14, verses 32-42:

³²They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' ³³He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' ³⁵And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' ³⁷He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? ³⁸Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' ³⁹And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

So Jesus, facing imminent death, went off by himself in his distress and prayed, begging God to come up with a different plan, one that didn't call for the ultimate sacrifice. After a while, though – evidently about an hour – Jesus felt the need to be with his friends and went back to where he had asked them to wait. They were asleep. So Jesus returned to pray some more. A second time, he went back to his disciples; again they were asleep. So he went a third time, to pray some more, still asking for a change in God's will. Finally, Jesus said, "Not my will, but yours be done." Now this is a familiar story, but perhaps its very familiarity is a problem; maybe we know it so well that we no longer ask questions about it. We should. There are at least three questions here that I think deserve answers.

First, *what was Jesus doing all that time?* The first time he went off to pray, the text suggests that he was gone an hour. Assuming the second two times were the same, we have three solid hours of prayer, but all we're told he said was, "Take this cup away from me," and "your will, not mine." That takes three seconds. What about the other two hours, fifty-nine minutes, and fifty-seven seconds? I'm serious here. Have you ever tried to pray for an hour straight? Even half an hour? It's not as easy as it sounds. In college, I set a goal of praying half an hour a day. I made lists of everyone I knew, wrote down everything I could think of to pray about, kept a checklist in my Bible. Ten minutes, tops. After that, my mind was wandering to my homework, play practice that night, that girl in the cowboy boots that I'd met in Sunday School. Three hours? No way!

But now, after re-thinking prayer for the past month, maybe we can answer that question. Remember, prayer is not just lists of our requests, and prayer does not have to involve words. Prayer can be anything we do, so long as we do it fully aware that God is with us. It doesn't

matter what Jesus said during those hours, or whether he said anything at all. Jesus was frightened, and he chose to take his fear into the presence of God. And that was prayer.

There's a second question from this passage, though: *Why did Jesus have to pray at all?* Surely you've wondered that. I mean, he was the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. He and the Father were one. It says it all through the Gospel of John. So, if he is himself God, who is he talking to? And if he himself is the Creator of time and space, why does he have to ask permission for anything? If I bake a batch of cookies, I don't have to ask myself permission to eat one. Why does Jesus have to ask for anything?

Now this gets a little more complex, but once again, from our thoughts on prayer over the past month, perhaps we can suggest an answer. Prayer is something that takes place in relationship – not just any relationship, either, but the specific relationship of love. God is love. I think this is why we have the Doctrine of the Trinity, which declares to us that God is both one and more than one. In fact, this is why we *have* to have something like the Doctrine of the Trinity: because God is love. God has always been love, from before the dawn of time. But love is only possible where there is another to love. If God has always been love, then God has never been alone. The eternal existence of God is a dance of overflowing love within God. That love inspired creation. That love prompted God to create us in the image and likeness of God, creatures that can not only be loved but can freely return God's love. So why did Jesus pray? Because the Son of God exists in an eternal relationship of love with the Father, and prayer is the expression of that love. Jesus prayed to the Father in his distress because he couldn't *not* turn to the one he loved.

But that does lead to one more question: *Why didn't Jesus get what he asked for?* You would think that if anyone's going to get his prayer answered, it would be the One who is in eternal relation to God. In the first sermon in this prayer series, we read in Matthew where Jesus tells his disciples that if they have faith as a grain of mustard seed, then whatever they ask will be granted. But Jesus himself doesn't get what he asks for? No. Instead, Jesus spends hours on his knees before God, wanting the Father to "take this cup away from me," but God doesn't. Instead Jesus changes his request. "Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want." And *that* is the answer to our question. Prayer is not about God discovering all the things we want – as if God were a little absent-minded and needed reminders – but rather about us discovering God. Prayer is throwing open a window between us and God, a window through which both can speak. In Gethsemane that night, Jesus opened the window. He expressed his fear, his deepest longing and asked for his circumstances to change. But in the presence of God, what changed was Jesus' fear.

The great Scottish Baptist, Oswald Chambers, once wrote: "It is not so true that prayer changes things as that prayer changes me and I change things" (cited in Roose, *Unlikely Disciple*, p. 223). But an even more memorable description comes from the recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who compares prayer to sunbathing:

When you're lying on the beach something is happening, something that has nothing to do with how you feel or how hard you're trying. You're not going to get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. You give the time, and that's it. All you have to do is turn up. And then things change, at their own pace. You simply have to be there where the light can get at you. (from a radio interview with Terry Wogan).

That's what prayer is. It is not getting God to do what we want; it is learning what God wants. It is not making others conform to our wishes; it is conforming ourselves to God's. It is not about what we can make happen; it is about what we can become in God's light. And the model of prayer is not someone who gets what he wants, but someone who simply reflects God.

In our Lenten services this season, we have prayed together the Evening Prayer from the Northumbria Community. As I mentioned once, that prayer was dear to my friend Pastor Karen Ebert, who in 2007 was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Karen was beloved by many, and thousands of prayers were raised for her healing. She was not healed. Four years after her diagnosis, she stepped down from the pastorate; two years later she died. A few months after leaving the pastorate and on the fourth anniversary of her diagnosis, she wrote the following reflection on that Evening Prayer:

Lord, you have always given strength for the day to come. And though I am poor, today I believe...

But I am not poor. I am rich. As we prepared our church pledge card yesterday, I realized that I had taken a much smaller hit to our income than I thought when I went on disability. I can still afford to be generous.

Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day. And though I am weak, today I believe...

But I am not weak either. I am strong. Far stronger than anyone predicted four years ago. Stronger even than any of us expected four months ago. My body has resources I did not know I could tap.

Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day. And though of anxious heart, today I believe...

But I am not anxious. Without the stress of work, and the constant urge to judge myself by my successes or failures there, I am more content than I can remember ever being. I am finally living in the now.

Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials. And now, tried though I am, today I believe...

But I am not facing trial. I have gone without a medical emergency for nearly three months now. After the crises of last spring, this is a welcome respite.

Lord, you have always marked the path for the coming day. And though it be hidden now, today I believe...

No, the path is not hidden. And though it is a hard path, I take strength in knowing exactly where I am headed. If I am still here next November 19, I will be part of a very select group of only 7% of those with my diagnosis. Please do not take this as an invitation to give me pep talks. I would rather negotiate the path I am really on, than pretend I'm on a road going some other direction entirely. I trip less often this way.

Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine. And though the night is here, today I believe...

Last night I slept in a bedroom with no curtains – we had just painted, and the paint wasn't dry enough to put the brackets back up yet. Even at night, there is a surprising amount of light, especially when the streetlight reflects off of new-fallen snow. There is no reason to be

afraid of the dark. If I say, "Let the darkness hide me," even the night is as day to you, Lord.

Lord, you have always spoken when the time is right. And though you are silent now, today I believe...

Silent, maybe. But sometimes words are overrated. No word needs to be spoken to take a turn carrying the baggage. No word needs to be spoken to hold a hand, or search another's eyes. No word needs to be spoken for me to know I am walking companionably with God down this path I am on.

It has been four years. And whatever lies ahead, I know this: All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. (Julian of Norwich).

That's what prayer looks like. We have spent a good bit of time this Lent, thinking about prayer, practicing prayer, and I hope expanding our definition of prayer. If we are with God, it is prayer. It is prayer even if we say nothing. It is prayer even if what we say is angry and unreasonable. It is prayer if we ask for nothing, and it is prayer if we ask for things and don't get them. So long as we are walking companionably with God along our journey, that is prayer. And prayer changes the world. Starting with us.