

More Than Words: What Is Prayer (Not)?

Matthew 21:18-22; James 5:13-18

We read two passages of scripture today. The first is an incident in Jesus' life, the day after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We read from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 21, verses 18-22:

¹⁸In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. ¹⁹And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, 'May no fruit ever come from you again!' And the fig tree withered at once. ²⁰When the disciples saw it, they were amazed, saying, 'How did the fig tree wither at once?' ²¹Jesus answered them, 'Truly I tell you, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be lifted up and thrown into the sea", it will be done. ²²Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive.'

Our second reading comes from the Book of James, chapter 5, verses 13-18:

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

This Lenten season we will be exploring prayer, and I wanted to start with these two passages, both of which speak directly to the power of prayer. In Matthew 21, Jesus blights a barren fig tree with a word and tells his disciples that if they have faith, without doubt, they can do such things, too – can even tell mountains to cast themselves into the sea, because *anything* they ask in faith they will receive. Then, in the second passage, Jesus' brother James says that when the elders of the church pray over the sick, the afflicted will be healed and their sins forgiven, because the prayer of the righteous is powerful. These are inspiring, encouraging words. God hears us when we pray, and God does reach into the world and change the normal order of events in response to our prayers, in recognition of our faith and righteousness and that of the church.

These are also troubling words, though. Because looking at these two passages . . . well, don't you have some questions? Like, Does God really grant trivial prayers? Jesus did *what* to a fig tree? Then he suggests that his disciples could make mountains toss themselves around? Why? Wouldn't that cause unimaginable human suffering? Earthquakes? Tsunamis? Okay, so maybe the mountain thing was just a figure of speech, but we still have a dead fig tree here. Has it never occurred to you that if Jesus could blight the tree with a word because it bore no fruit, he might have been able to say a different word and make it fruitful? Then everybody could have had figs. Win-win. And then there's the healing stuff over in James. It's great that the elders can anoint the sick and pray over them and bring healing, but . . . how many times will that work? Because, you know, if it worked every time, we'd all live forever, wouldn't we? So when doesn't it work? Well, Jesus seems to say that it works when we have faith and never doubt. So maybe it

only works when we have enough faith? James says that the prayer of the *righteous* is very effective. So does it only work if we've been really good?

And that's when these Bible verses come smashing into the very different testimony of experience. The fact is, we pray for people to be healed, and it doesn't always happen. Not even when we pray with faith. When we were in Wausau, the city had its moment of national news spotlight, when Dale and Leilani Neumann of that area had faith that their prayers would heal their daughter Kara, so they didn't take her to the doctor for the insulin that she needed. Whatever else you may say about the Neumann's tragic decision, they certainly had a lot of faith, and their prayers weren't answered. Kara died. In fact, in light of experience, there are many questions to ask about prayer. A few years ago, I got an email from my daughter Grace, then in college, that I've saved. Let me read it to you:

So, prayer has been on my mind for a while now – for a range of reasons. I know this isn't one of those easy-answer type of things, but I keep on thinking myself in circles and I think I need to get this out of my headspace. *[At this point Grace described a prayer that she had prayed fervently on behalf of a friend, a request that had not been granted. She continues.]*

And I keep thinking about this and I'm not getting anywhere. On the one hand, the easy answer is that I didn't pray right, or hard enough, or I wasn't looking at the issue from the right direction, or something like that. But I'm not sure that's right – because it is the easy answer. It turns the problem into my fault for not praying better rather than the big over-arching issue it actually is. It becomes an excuse for me to take the blame, which is not right.

But on the other hand, if I believe in prayer – and I do – then I must believe that a single person's prayer can have an effect – which begs the question why mine didn't? Which lands itself quite nicely back where I started – not helpful. So I try to circumvent that train of thought. Maybe this was the better solution. Maybe God carefully weighed all the options and decided that this was better for everyone involved, or at least for my friend. But that's also an easy answer, leading to "Everything happens for a reason," which is – at best – an insensitive platitude. I don't like that option either.

She puts it nicely, doesn't she? All pastors should have daughters to write their sermons. But now that Grace has framed the question for us, how do we even begin to answer?

Well, that's all we're going to try to do today: begin. We'll be meditating on prayer for the next several weeks, so today all I want to do is suggest three basic parameters. First, whatever understanding of prayer we come up with has to include the possibility of God choosing not to do what we ask. I know this sounds like a cop-out, that if our prayers are answered we can say, "Yay, God!" but if they aren't we just say, "Oh, well, I guess God said no." But in the end, if God is not free to say no, then we are the ones in control, not God, and a god that we can control is not a god at all. Christians have been fighting for 2000 years about whether humans have free will; can we at least agree that God does? Second, our answer has to allow God more than two options in responding to our prayers, not just *yes* or *no*, but also *not yet* and *well, yes, but not in the way you want* and *up to a point, maybe* or even *Is that all you want? You can do better than that*. One example: my last couple of years as a Baptist pastor I was desperately unhappy and prayed hard for God to get me out of there. Now my specific plan was for God to make one of my books a bestseller and me independently wealthy. God's still stalling on that one. The idea that, instead of escaping the pastorate entirely, I might find renewed

fulfillment as a pastor at the Methodist church that I drove by every day on my way to work, and in the process make one of the great friends of my life in Pastor Karen Ebert, never occurred to me. I didn't pray that because I couldn't imagine it, and yet it was the answer to my prayer. Third, when we pray for God to act in the world, we can't imagine that God will always just do everything while we stand by and watch. We must be open to the possibility that the way God answers our prayer may be partly through our own action. God couldn't have answered my prayer in that way if Rebecca hadn't brought me a flyer about the job opening at the Methodist Church and if I hadn't sent in my application.

So whatever we end up believing about prayer has to allow God the freedom to act as God chooses and has to acknowledge that the answer may be different – and more demanding – than we want. But that's not our usual idea of prayer. No, we often have the attitude of King Balak of Moab. Let me tell you that story. In the Book of Numbers, we read that the people of Israel, who had been set free from Egypt by God, were moving toward the Promised Land, but right between them and the Promised Land stood the nation of Moab. The king of Moab, Balak, sent for a famous Moabite prophet named Balaam to pray down a curse on the Israelites before they got any farther. Now, it appears that God had a longstanding relationship with this non-Israelite prophet, because they were on speaking terms. God told Balaam to go to King Balak but warned him to speak only what God told him. So King Balak took the prophet up a mountain, offered sacrifices, then said, "Curse away!" But God told Balaam to bless the Israelites, so he did. What did Balak do? He took Balaam to a different mountain and said, "Try it from here." Again Balaam blessed Israel. So Balak took him to a third mountain: "See if it works better from this angle."

What is Balak's theology of prayer? That prayer is a tool for getting what you want. Balak isn't interested in what God might want, only in what he can get God to do for him. Moreover, for Balak, getting God to meet his demands is about getting the prayer *right*: getting the *right* person to say the *right* words in the *right* environment. Balak treats prayer like a chemistry lab experiment. If you mix the right chemicals in the right proportions – while controlling for impurities and maintaining the correct lab environment – you should get the desired result every time. *That's* the attitude we often have toward prayer. When we complain about how God doesn't answer our prayers, it is generally because we are picturing prayer as a controlled process that we are initiating, in which God is the key reactive agent that we are adding to the solution, and we think we've done it right, but our results are off.

But prayer is not a science experiment, because God refuses to be measured out to use at our discretion. Instead – and we're going to flesh this out over the next few weeks – *prayer is communication in relationship*. No relationship can survive if one party sees the relationship only as a way to get stuff. Our relationship with God has to be about more than that. We pray, "Our Father," not "Our Sugar Daddy." Prayer is communication in relationship, and in a genuine relationship, both parties are free, which means that even when each party trusts the other, neither is entirely predictable. In that volatile and exciting environment that we have to start.

But now we've talked enough about prayer. It is time to pray.

Our God, do you really hear us? If so, then hear our prayer today
We pray for those in our congregation who are grieving today.

(silence)

For those who live in the presence of death each day, either their own or that of someone they love.

(silence)

For those who live each day with pain, the pain of aching joints, of scars not yet healed, of addictions that gnaw at every unguarded moment, of depression

(silence)

We know we can't demand your obedience, God. We can't tell you what to do, but these people whose names and faces have filled our meditation today are people we love. Do something, at least! Help them, I pray.
And tell us how we can be your instruments.

Our God, do you really hear us? If so, then hear our prayer today
We pray for those in world who are refugees today: we name the peoples of Syria, Iraq, Sri Lanka, South Sudan, Central Africa, Venezuela.

(silence)

For those who face death each day, by disease or war: we name the people of West Africa, and Iraq, and Syria

(silence)

For those who are oppressed because of their faith, their language, their sex, their gender identity: we name the girls of Nigeria, the Christians of Egypt, the Muslims of Central African Republic, gay and lesbian people everywhere.

(silence)

We know we can't demand your obedience, God. We can't tell you what to do, but these people whose names and faces have filled our meditation today are people you created in love. Do something, at least! Help them, I pray.

And tell us how we can be your instruments. Amen.