

24 March 2019

More Than Words: Prayers of Honesty
Psalm 109:1-20

As we continue our Lenten sermon series on prayer, we start today with a music video about prayer: “I Pray for You.”

Show video “I Pray for You” by Jaron and the Long Road to Love. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atBg9zLI2bA>

Our scripture this morning comes from Psalm 109. We read the first 20 verses. Today we read from the contemporary version called *The Message*.

¹My God, don't turn a deaf ear to my hallelujah prayer. ²Liars are pouring out invective on me; their lying tongues are like a pack of dogs out to get me, ³barking their hate, nipping my heels - and for no reason! ⁴I loved them and now they slander me - yes, me! - and treat my prayer like a crime; ⁵they return my good with evil, they return my love with hate.

⁶Send the Evil One to accuse my accusing judge; dispatch Satan to prosecute him. ⁷When he's judged, let the verdict be, "Guilty," and when he prays, let his prayer turn to sin. ⁸Give him a short life, and give his job to somebody else. ⁹Make orphans of his children, dress his wife in widow's weeds; ¹⁰turn his children into begging street urchins, evicted from their homes - homeless. ¹¹May the bank foreclose and wipe him out, and strangers, like vultures, pick him clean. ¹²May there be no one around to help him out, no one willing to give his orphans a break. ¹³Chop down his family tree so that nobody even remembers his name. ¹⁴But erect a memorial to the sin of his father, and make sure his mother's name is there, too - ¹⁵their sins recorded forever before God, but they themselves sunk in oblivion.

¹⁶That's all he deserves since he was never once kind, hounded the afflicted and heartbroken to their graves. ¹⁷Since he loved cursing so much, let curses rain down; since he had no taste for blessing, let blessings flee far from him. ¹⁸He dressed up in curses like a fine suit of clothes; he drank curses, took his baths in curses. ¹⁹So give him a gift - a costume of curses; he can wear curses every day of the week! ²⁰That's what they'll get, those out to get me - an avalanche of just deserts from God.

I might have had you read that psalm responsively this morning, but for some reason that one didn't get included in our hymnal. Go figure. Horrible, isn't it? What a nasty, vindictive prayer. And it's not the only one, either. Psalm 5 is pretty bad. Psalm 26. And how'd you like the last verse of Psalm 137, which we read as our “Call to Worship”? There are enough of these horrors that scholars even have an official name for them, “Psalms of Imprecation.” That means psalms of “You go to . . . !” They're in there. Not in our hymnal, but definitely in our Bible. So, what are we supposed to do with this stuff? For the past few weeks, I've been telling you that we need to broaden our definition of prayer – but do we need to broaden it this much? Do we need to include venomous, hateful, mean-spirited prayers?

Yes. We do.

Let's go back to the working definition of prayer we're using in this series: *prayer is communication in relationship*. I'm going to ask you to do some imagining with me. First, imagine people you have relationships with, whom you love, enjoy spending time with, but whom you know you can't talk about certain subjects with. "Oh, Clarisse is great. You'll love her! Just . . . don't mention home-schooling or vaccinations, all right?" or "Greg's great. He'll do anything for a friend, but, um, it's best not to bring up Trump." The taboo subject might be anything – pesticides, yoga, collective bargaining, homosexuality, or the misuse of apostrophes – but the result is the same. Every subject that you can't talk about sets a limit on your relationship with that person. Even worse is when the problem is a matter of trust. We probably all know someone whom we like but to whom we would never tell anything confidential. And again, to the extent that your communication with a person has limits, so does your relationship.

Now imagine someone else. Imagine the one or two people whom you trust the most, the people you go to when you have to unload. Who do you talk to when you've just had the worst day of school ever or when you don't think you can stand that back-stabbing co-worker one more minute? Who is the person who you *know* will listen without judging you or offering unsolicited advice, who will understand your feelings and share them up to a point but without egging you on and making you feel worse. Who are the people who you know will still love you no matter what unguarded statement you might make, who might say, "I hear you" or "That's terrible" or may say nothing at all, but who will never, ever get all prim and proper and say, "If you can't say something nice about someone . . ." or "Now, you don't really mean that!" or "Let's try to think happy thoughts!" This person, this person is a treasure beyond value, right? And to the extent that you can say just *anything* to this person and know you haven't jeopardized your friendship, then this relationship is deep and true.

So you probably see where this is going. If prayer is communication in relationship, then one measure of the depth of our relationship to God is how much of ourselves we're willing to share with God. Are there things you would never dream of admitting to God in prayer? Why? Are you afraid God will be shocked? Will no longer like you? Will tell you to think happy thoughts? You know, I don't think so. The psalmists say *everything* to God. Look at Psalm 109 – "God, kill my enemy, leave his orphaned children begging on the streets, and set up a monument proclaiming his father's sins for all the world to see. And put his mother's sins up there, too." Whatever the psalmists feel – no matter how mean and vicious – they just dump it on God.

We don't. We pray G-rated prayers in prim tones and prissy language, as if God were a starched-up maiden aunt who might look disapprovingly down her spectacles at us and then write us out of her will. We are so careful not to betray any anger, or really any unpleasant emotions, in our prayers, as if we didn't want God to know we ever had those thoughts. Think about that for a moment. How dense do we have to be to think we can hide something from God? God knows when you're angry with your neighbor, your co-worker, your spouse, so don't pretend. In fact, sometimes we're angry with God . . . and God knows that, too, so we might as well just say it. The psalmists do that, too. Psalm 89 starts out thanking God for the covenant with David, the promise that David's line would never end and that there would always be an

anointed king in Jerusalem, Then the last fifteen verses of the psalm say, basically, “But, hey God! – now Jerusalem’s been destroyed, the line of David has been cut off, and you, God, are a freaking liar.” Go read that psalm: Psalm 89. But don’t bother looking for it in the hymnal; those last verses got left out. Evidently we aren’t supposed to talk like that to God.

Yes. We. Are.

Look, if prayer is about relationship, and if we actually want this relationship thing with God to grow and mature – as healthy relationships are *supposed* to – then we need to be honest. We need to tell God what we’re thinking and feeling. We need to trust God at least as much as we trust that friend that we dump on. We need to trust God to hear what we say and to be smart enough to know how much we actually mean, independent enough to ignore our nastiest requests, and to be caring enough to love us anyway.

Let me close with a story. A few years ago, I spent several months doing Clinical Pastoral Education, which involved my serving as a part-time chaplain at a hospital. Well, one day I dropped by a room in ICU to visit a new patient. I don’t remember exactly what had put her in intensive care, but she was awake and alert and willing to talk. In fact, I’d barely gotten there before she launched into a diatribe against Muslims. They were taking over our country and they all supported terrorists and so on. She wrapped up by saying, “You know what we need? We need another Crusade, like in the Middle Ages, and just go over and kill them all!” Now, remember, I’m a caring, compassionate chaplain-sort, or at least trying to look like one while on duty. I had enough presence of mind that, even though I found her opinion repugnant, I chose not to argue theology with a patient in ICU. That’s pretty impressive, wouldn’t you say? I thought so. In fact, I was so pleased with my self-restraint that I told my CPE group about it at our next meeting, so they would know how sensitive and pastoral care-y I had been not to get into an argument. The group supervisor, Kate, nodded slowly and said, “She sounds really frightened. I wonder what she was frightened of.” Oh. The woman in that hospital bed wasn’t worried about Muslims. She was scared because she was in ICU. She was scared because people in white coats were running all sorts of tests she didn’t understand and using words she’d never heard but sounded terminal. She was afraid because she had tubes in her arm and machines beeping beside her. She was afraid she might die, and she was frightened for her family – what would they do without her? But I missed it. I heard every word she said, but I didn’t listen to her.

Here’s the good news: God’s a better listener than I am. When we pray, God hears – really hears. When we ask God to hurt someone we can’t stand, God hears our words, but God also hears our hearts – our doubts and hurts and fears. We can speak to God in the language that we actually speak or even in words that we don’t dare say to anyone else, without worrying about what God thinks, because what God thinks is just this: “I love you, you know.”

Let’s pray.

God, here we are, just as we are. Full of all the feelings that make us so difficult. Partly, we’re angry.

Sometimes we're angry at you.

I still think you screwed up to let Karen die.

I'm impatient with how long it's taking you to keep your promises and answer prayers.

Even more often we're angry at others.

I'm mad at the Wesley Covenant Association for taking over the United Methodist Church, and I don't care that they thought they were serving you. They hurt people that I love, and I'm angry.

I'm mad at every politician who cares more about personal power than about actually serving the people of this country. I could name some names, but you know them. I pray that they're voted out of office, as a consequence of their sniveling self-centeredness and that they become warnings to others.

I'm mad at corporations that systematically damage our world and at everyone else who chooses to be rich now by destroying the future of others. God, wipe out their profits and empty their trust funds.

I'm mad at the internet and television personalities who make their living by feeding people's resentments. I'm angry on behalf of the Muslims in Christchurch, New Zealand, who lost loved ones at the hand of a white supremacist who was radicalized in racist chat rooms. God, raise up armies of people who love, radicalize their love in opposition to this hatred.

God, I'm telling you what I want. Take it for what it's worth, and only you know how much that is. I do wish you'd fix things for once. But until then, you're still our best – our only - hope. Thanks for listening. Amen.