

James 5:7-16

14th Sunday after Pentecost, August 26, 2018

Luke 13:1-17

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Sermon: Prayer, Healing, Wholeness and Peace

Volumes of books have been written on the topics of prayer, healing, wholeness and peace. There's no way I can give the topic a thorough look/see in one little sermon. So my purpose here is to offer a series of thoughts on one piece of the topic and that piece is prayer.

I suspect that all of us have had a point in our lives when we've railed at God because God hasn't answered our prayers – at least we perceive that God hasn't answered our prayers or that God hasn't answered our prayers in the way that we wanted them to be answered.

That's looking at the whole matter from our perspective. I suggest that our starting point needs to be God instead. Let's remember who God is. God isn't Santa Claus, making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who is naughty or nice and then give accordingly. And certainly God isn't your Jeannie in a bottle – or in heaven as the case may be – ready to make every one of your wishes come true.

God is our creator, redeemer and sustainer. To acknowledge God as our creator is to acknowledge our dependence on God, our need to trust God and our need to live our lives as God desires. However, we don't always trust, nor do we live our lives as God desires – that's where another aspect of God comes in – God is love. That love includes mercy and forgiveness. And then there's something else that needs to be said: God is also all-knowing – and we are not. And that's where trust comes in, because sometimes our prayers are not answered or are answered in a way that wasn't according to our plans. I've often thought that I don't necessarily know what danger or calamity God has saved me from by not answering my prayers in the way that I wanted them answered. It was C. S. Lewis who said that "if God had granted me all the silly prayers I had prayed, where should I be now?" There's another thought that always gives me comfort and that is this: faith tells me that no matter what lies ahead, God is already there.

So let's talk about prayer. I've often heard people say that they don't know how to pray ... that they aren't sure that they are praying correctly. First, let's remember that the power of our prayers is not in the one who says it, but in the one who is hearing it. Second, there isn't a skill factor in praying. Twenty years ago, Dr. Larry Dossey wrote a book that has become a classic on the subject. It is called "Prayer Is Good Medicine." In it, he describes a letter that he received from a woman who said to him, "Prayer is a level playing field. When we pray we are all the same. Coming from the heart in love and sincerity is the only thing that counts."

And speaking of love, Dossey goes on to remind us of an old saying, "Love is like bread. It has to be made fresh daily." For me prayer is an act of love and compassion, to be made fresh daily. Think about how much love is vital in the

healing of the mind, of emotions and of the spirit – in the healing of divisions within families and among people. For me, this is a reminder to pray with love and a reminder that people do grow and relationships grow well and things do heal when there is love...and prayer.

Corrie ten Boon once said, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” We all can recognize the tendency for spiritual practices, such as prayer, to spiral into inactivity. It’s easy to get lazy. It is easy to have good intentions and that’s it. Dr. Dossey quoted a German proverb saying, “God give us the nuts, but he does not crack them.” God gave us the gift of prayer, but we have to use it. We have to pray. At the same time, it must be said that prayer isn’t a substitute for action. It should boot us into action. Regular prayer, over time, can also serve to clarify perspective of what should be done, not in a lightning strike sort of way, but often subtly and slowly. And then we’ve got to do it.

I had that experience recently. About four weeks ago I was preparing for the August 1st session meeting. It was the annual meeting in which session welcomes new elders, evaluates the previous year and makes plans for the coming year. Part of my preparation was to review membership and attendance at worship statistics. Honestly, I found the statistics to be troubling. You can look around and see what the statistics show – our attendance at worship is dropping. People are dying and moving away. That in and of itself is sad and troubling. But I also found it troubling because we do so much publicity and we do so many programs and thereby touch so many lives. And people are coming to our programs and events, but why not worship? So I prayed. And I prayed that afternoon. And over the course of the hours of praying and thinking, the realization came, in what to this day, I consider to be a God moment. Yes, we are doing many programs, but we are not creating pathways from those programs into worship. Those pathways into worship are vital because first, we are not a non-profit organization putting on programs but we are a church and central to being a church and the life of a Christian is worship. And worship is where people who have gotten connected with us through programs then get connected with God and God’s call in their lives to serve him through the church. That’s what came to me that afternoon.

After that the next step was to present this to session to see and hear if they were hearing the same thing from God. And it clicked with session also – big time! It really resonated with the elders. What became of it is that one of our goals for the coming year is to create pathways into worship for people, however it is that they first connect with us. Again, the point is: prayer can clarify our vision of what needs to be done.

One last story: we all know that Abraham Lincoln had a rich prayer life. And we all know that in his early life he had this intuition that some kind of meaningful and important work lay ahead of him. But he grew up on the frontier with few tools or opportunities in order to acquire the professional skills and the knowledge needed for something big and important.

One day a stranger with a barrel full of odds and ends and old newspapers came by. The stranger was obviously down on his luck and very needy. The stranger offered to sell the whole lot of stuff to Lincoln for a dollar. Lincoln we also know to have been a kind man and so he gave the man the dollar even though he had no idea what was in the barrel. What Lincoln found among the junk turned out to be a treasure – what he found was an almost complete edition of Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, which Lincoln studied. These books helped Lincoln become a lawyer and eventually enter politics.

Lincoln didn’t get zapped during prayer with a sudden revelation of his life’s work. He didn’t get zapped in prayer with a sudden revelation as to how he was going to put all the pieces together in order to fulfill his life’s work. It was humble ingredients – an intuition, a barrel of junk, a stranger in need, a dollar, Lincoln’s innate kindness and his constant life of prayer – that shaped him and went on to shape our nation.

We have this way of expecting instant results, even from prayer. And we have this way of being dazzled by big money and spectacular events and stunning revelations and quick cures and so on. Therefore it is easy to look at prayer as the ticket to something spectacular – the instant cure, the instant answer or the instant reconciliation. As Dossey points out, when we keep looking for the extraordinary, we become “insensitive” to the central fact of life: it is all a miracle, down to the most ordinary details.