

# 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

7<sup>th</sup> April 2019

Matthew 6:9-13

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*Mediation or Meditation*

There were a lot of things to dread as a seminary student, at least in our denomination. There was the annual interview with your oversight committee at the Presbytery, not to mention the inquiry, candidacy, and readiness interviews, all of which determined whether or not you got to continue in your chosen career path. There was the mid-course assessment by the seminary, sitting down with a panel of faculty and peers to determine admittance to your final year. There were the ordination exams that boasted about a 40% pass rate on

your first attempt. But more than any of those things, the most fear inducing element I remember from my entire seminary experience was something called...CPE.

CPE stands for Clinical Pastoral Education. It involved spending 400 hours in some kind of clinical setting, most often a hospital, with time split between providing care for patients and hospital staff and then sitting in a CPE group with the other students and a supervisor reviewing and critiquing those interactions. The purpose is to help make you, as a caregiver, aware of your own issues and biases

in order to provide more appropriate care for others.

And the way those review sessions would work is that we would each present something called a verbatim. The idea is write out, as best as you can remember, the conversation between you and a client and then everyone gets to read and comment on what you said in that exchange.

I did my CPE unit at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta. My first week started with a few days in orientation, including a two-hour required seminar for all hospital employees on how to wash your hands. Then our first day on the floor, we were all sent out to our respective areas, mine being the pediatric hospital, with instructions to check with the floor nurse supervisor and see who needed a visit. I was sent to the room of a 17 year old African

American woman who was dying from AIDS related complications. This was back in the mid-1990s, and treatment options were not as effective as they are today.

After we'd visited for a while and the time came for me to leave, I asked her if I could offer a prayer. She agreed. I actually went back this week and found a copy of that verbatim on my computer so I could see exactly what I said. My prayer included the line, "I pray that your hand would be with the doctors and nurses who care for P to bring her healing and peace." I concluded the prayer with the obligatory "Amen," and then turned to leave when I heard her say, "don't pray that for me again."

"Don't pray what?" I asked.

"Don't pray for me to be healed," she said. "I don't want to be healed. I want to

die.”

Our conversation continued after that, but she taught me a valuable lesson in pastoral care that day-- that it was not my place to decide what she did or did not need from God, and for me to pray for healing for someone who didn't ask for that was a presumptuous error on my part.

That verbatim, however, led to a very fruitful conversation in our next CPE group about the nature of prayer. Was prayer a way of asking or petitioning God to change God's mind about something?

There are some examples in the Bible of this kind of prayer. One of my favorites is the exchange between Abraham and God when Abraham keeps bargaining with God to spare the city of Sodom.

“Will you spare it if I can

find 50 righteous people?” Abraham asks.

“Yes? Great! Then what about if I only find 45? How about just 40? What if it's only 30? Still yes? Awesome! What if it's only 20? Still yes? Hallelujah! Now, what if I can only find 10 righteous people? Will you still spare Sodom for just 10?”

Abraham is definitely the guy I want with me the next time I go car shopping. That kind of discount could save you tens of thousands of dollars. Now, fast forward a couple of chapters and Sodom gets destroyed anyway because they refuse to extend hospitality to strangers as required by the Law, but that's another matter.

But if that's what prayer is--petitioning God to change God's mind about something--then it raises all kinds of moral issues. Like what kind of God would destroy a city or let a young 17

year old woman die of AIDS unless someone decided to offer the right prayer at the right time to intervene? Or what about all those times when people did offer intercessory prayer for someone or some situation only to see that nothing changed? Were their prayers simply not as efficacious as someone else's?

If prayer is some kind of divine currency for the "great vending machine in the sky," then theologically, that kind of belief leaves us with either a God whose will and actions can be influenced or even controlled, or it leaves us with a God who is unconcerned and flippant about responding to prayer. Pragmatically, it's demonstrably untrue and believing that it is true can lead to a lifetime of wounds and anger with God.

Beyond that, as in the case of that young woman for whom I prayed, what

right did I or anyone else have to ask God for health or healing for someone who didn't want it? One of the real privileges of being a pastor is being invited to be with people at transitional times in life, including at the end of life. And I've been with plenty of people who were ready to let go of this life for whatever comes next. They did not want to be healed, nor did they want me to pray for healing.

But that's not how I see prayer anymore. And that's bound up with the idea I've been exploring the past few weeks about my own image or understanding of God. After I preached the sermon *Deconstructing God* a few weeks ago and made the statement that I don't see God as a heavenly "Being," several of you have asked me since then what I understand prayer to be. After all, if God is not a supernatural

being dwelling in the heavens, then who or what is listening to our prayers? To whom are we offering our words of petition when we pray?

As a caveat that I've tried to offer throughout this series, all I can do and all I intend to do is to offer how I have come to reconcile these spiritual questions for myself. I don't presume to have access to some divine truth that escapes others simply by virtue of my education or ordination, or my incredible skills as a stunningly good looking preacher and orator. I do think we're on a journey together to seek a meaningful way of understanding the Divine nature within the created order of the universe and I offer my own thoughts for your consideration.

With that in mind, prayer is a practice that, for me, has undergone a significant transformation since

those early days of my ministry. I no longer see prayer as mediation, but rather as meditation. To me, prayer is mindfulness; prayer is being attentive to the world and to God's activity in it. Prayer is, to borrow a line from a singer/songwriter friend David LaMotte, prayer is holding someone in the light.

Part of the question, for me, about prayer comes down to how God interacts with Creation. One of the claims I made in *Deconstructing God* is that I don't see God as a supernatural being who intervenes in the created order in ways that defy the laws of the physical universe. But that does not mean that I see prayer as nothing more than empty words offered up to the ether. Because I do think God interacts with Creation. I just don't think God does it in supernatural ways motivated by prayers. Rath-

er, I think God interacts in Creation by acting in and through us as reflections of God.

So, even if prayer somehow influenced the will of God, I don't see God reaching down from the sky and mucking about with the world all haphazardly. Instead, I see God impacting the world through relationship with each of us and the actions we take in the world. That's both an internal and external God. For me, prayer is one of the ways we connect with that God, both internally and externally. It is a chance to grow in that relationship – including speaking about the difficult places in life and in the world. It's an opportunity to commune with God and to be oriented toward God. Intersessions are still important in that perspective, but we must understand that it is not us asking God for a

result from the great vending machine, but rather us being reminded that we are how God intercedes.

Prayer, whether offered as words we or someone else articulates, or offered as an open space or receptivity to the Spirit as we do here during meditation, prayer is a way of intentionally engaging our conscious mind with our highest values. In prayer, we are reminded of the things that matter most – not only for ourselves, but for others. By aspiring to focus our minds and hearts on these things, we become more open to potential choices before us that might make life more meaningful, purposeful, or beautiful.

I generally don't do petitionary prayer unless it is for others, or for ways I can be a better person. I don't pray to get things, or have my life changed for me in

a way that takes away my cooperation. Rather I pray so as to encourage my efforts at doing what I can to bring about the person I should be — regardless of the outcomes.

Which means that for me, I see my prayers answered not when events happen beyond my control and participation, but when I live closer to the values and virtues I seek to emulate.

That approach to me is informed by what I talked about in last Sunday's sermon - a belief that the divine resides within each one of us, and so connecting and relating to that sacred image within us nurtures us to connect and relate to that sacred image within others. Prayer reminds me that we are all siblings, and that my prayers should never be about what profits me or my friends or loved ones at the

expense of others. Prayer encourages us to see how our reality is intertwined with that of others.

The reading I selected for this morning is a model prayer offered by Jesus. I'm planning to explore this particular prayer in more detail in a couple of future sermons, but I think Jesus offers an example of a prayer that is not about trying to change the Divine will, but about mindfulness and attentiveness to our own actions, our own role, our own potential in helping to co-create the kingdom of God here, in this place, in our own lives, in our families, in our communities, to create communities that look a little more like "heaven."

This kind of prayer prompts us to awareness of the values we cherish, and invites us to live into those

values. Reality still may not turn out as we had hoped for, but at least we have sought awareness for how we can be a force for positive intervention in the world. And I have no doubt at all that if more of us did that as a regular practice, we would indeed get a little closer to God's kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.