

Prayer Changes People

Pentecost V

Text: Jeremiah 29:11-14; Psalm 131:1-2; Matthew 6:8-9

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

July 9, 2000

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Some months ago I received a letter from one of our members, a good friend with whom I was going to have lunch, and as a prelude to the lunch, he gave me a series of questions that he thought would be good for discussion. He indicated that he had heard, from me and others who had come this way, the ultra-liberal view of things and he wondered about the old, traditional answers to some of the old, traditional questions, such as Creation and Adam and Eve and the Virgin Birth and Resurrection, Salvation through Christ alone. Then he had a whole paragraph on prayer in which he indicated that he had a Christian surgeon friend who said that in all of his many, many years and many, many procedures he had never known any effect of prayer in the changing of the result. He gave a whole paragraph to prayer and so, while I didn't think I wanted to get back to Adam and Eve or even the Virgin Birth, I thought probably those old questions about prayer continue to come, to rise within us in the variety of our human experience.

What does prayer mean? Does prayer change anything? Does it affect reality? Prayer, now, not in its whole spectrum. There is prayer as praise. Prayer as adoration, prayer as confession, prayer as thanksgiving. That's all given. But, prayer as intercession, prayer as petition, prayer that asks God, as it were, to do something. That kind of prayer has always been the source of deep questions within our Christian experience, and so I thought this morning it might be well for us to spend a little time and reflect on prayer because certainly prayer is the very heart and center of the religious life or spiritual life. To be religious or to be spiritual is to pray, and yet, as our understanding of our faith and our experience moves and changes, how do we understand this exercise of prayer, this communion with God, this conversation with God? And does prayer affect or change reality?

Those questions are certainly not new and I recognize and I want to say in the beginning that to give a sermon on the subject of prayer requires of one to be very careful and very sensitive. There are devotional habits that we have all developed over the years and it is never my intention to talk anyone out of that which is

satisfying and that which works for them in their spiritual pilgrimage and in their Christian life. My correspondent was taking a step back and looking at prayer somewhat objectively, wondering about it from a step removed from real existential engagement, and a sermon necessarily has to do that, too, and all of us can do that on occasion. But, to preach a sermon on prayer is a very risky thing because, in a congregation gathered like this, the whole spectrum of human experience is present, and while there are plenty of you who can take that step back and think with me about it this morning, there are no doubt others of you here in an existential point in your life where you are praying for your life, and I have often found that while many times with many people a conversation about prayer is possible, for others, it creates a great defensiveness and we become very protective and can be easily wounded as one discusses this kind of thing. In the crucible, we tend to react emotionally, not rationally, and in a setting like this this morning I am aware that there may be those of you who are deeply engaged in some existential moment where the wrestling and prayer is where you are, and I hope that you can, nonetheless, for just a few moments, think about this wonderful gift, this wonderful reality that we call prayer.

I had set down this topic some weeks ago and was intending fully to treat it as one has to treat it, from a step removed, looking at it as a phenomenon of the spiritual life, and two weeks ago, my sister Lois underwent surgery. The diagnosis was melanoma cancer in all the vital organs and in the brain, and the doctor gave the diagnosis to her in the presence of her family and she is now home under Hospice care, for he said it could be a week or it could be a month, those things are not predictable. And last week a niece of mine – who happens to be the oldest grandchild of my parents, who when she was a little tyke I took care of one whole summer because her mother, my sister, couldn't pick her up, being pregnant once again, another one with whom I am very closely bonded – had a stroke, followed by seizures which have continued through the week, as late as this past Friday.

And so, I found myself praying, and a preacher is always thinking about the next sermon, and so for the last two weeks I have been very much aware of what I intuitively sense, of what I emotionally feel, and of what I intellectually understand. I've been preaching this sermon for two weeks in quite another fashion than I intended to when I put down the subject and committed myself to preach on prayer today, and it's been really a good exercise for me because I have been so existentially engaged in the practice of prayer while also reflecting on the praying and on my own engagement in this exercise, and what I have come to see is that *my understanding of prayer is really part and parcel of my understanding of God*. And my understanding of God, it is no secret to you who have been with me for a while, the image of God has been transformed over the last few years from the classic theism with which I was nurtured and educated and which for most of my ministry I preached, transformed from that classic theism to an understanding of God as part of the reality of our life. The old classic theistic conception of God is that of the supernatural being outside of our reality who dips into our reality now and again to effect this or that, that idea of God as

Almighty, the sovereign of history, the ruler of the world, the one who shifts the gears of the universe, the one who determines all that happens, that one, in a word, who is in control -that's the God with which most of us have grown up. But, also I think that image of God or the understanding of God has become more difficult for us. As we have come to more and more of an understanding of our world, of our human existence, of reality as such, I think that that old image of God as Almighty, in control, has really created our problems with prayer, because I do believe in all honesty that prayer has been a question and oftentimes an anguishing problem for devout persons.

For example, I pray for my child and she is healed. You pray for your child and she dies. Or, droughts and floods and hurricanes and all of those natural disasters that we call in the insurance lingo the "acts of God," a God who is all-powerful and is in control, but does not rule out cancer in a child, or in our own lifetimes that most chilling realization that God's chosen people, the Jews, could be murdered en masse, six million, as occurred in the Holocaust. What does one do with God in control in face of human tragedy and suffering?

Well, of course, I know the traditional answers - "God makes no mistakes," we say, feeling we have to say something in the face of tragedy, saying something like that which can really only wound the one who has experienced great loss. Or, "It is the inscrutable will of God and it will be made clear one day." Well, you can't argue with that and it has worked for many people, but in all honesty, it doesn't work for me anymore and I suspect there are many of you who say the same. If God can heal, why is it only one here and there? If God can send the rain or spare it, if God can send the wind or hold it back, then why should life be laced with such ongoing suffering and tragedy, if God is really in control? That is, if God really controls, pulls the levers, the strings, and determines all that happens?

In the face of my own existential concern for those I dearly love, I had an opportunity to test the different image of God, not a God in control, but a God a part of the very reality of which we are all a part. If you want an attempt to label it, it is a conception that can be referred to as *pan-entheism*. *Pan* is the Greek word for "all," and the preposition *en* is "in," and *theos*, of course, is the Greek word for God. Pan-entheism tries to say God in everything and everything in God. God more than everything, but nothing apart from God, nothing exists apart from the presence of God. All of reality shot through with God. God present to all and all embraced in God, so that God is not one who needs to be called into the process. God is not one being, be God supernatural and super-human, human writ large. God is not just another being, a spiritual factor that here and there reflects the course of nature and interrupts the process, but rather, God as the enlivening center of all that is, the creative Spirit that moves it all. God present to all, in all and all in God so that prayer becomes coming to be at one with that mystery that is one with us.

How, then, does one pray? Did I, do I pray for God to heal my sister's cancer? No, I don't. What, then, do I pray for? I pray for awareness. I pray for an awareness of the presence of the life-giving, loving God in all things that binds us all together. I pray for a sense of the enlivening, life-enhancing, loving, sacred and holy One, bringing me and those I love into sync with that which is God, the deepest and most profound Mystery of all reality. Because when I can come to recognize my part as a part of the whole, when I come to sense that I am laced into this whole amazing and wonderful miracle we call life and reality, when I come to the awareness that God is in me and with me and in and with those I love, then, in that awareness, there comes a certain peace, aware of the totality of things, of life's beauty and its terror, of a flower in a crannied wall and a child with cancer, and knowing that all of it is a part of this reality into which our lives are woven, a reality that is shot through with the holy, a reality to which God is present at all times, in all things, a presence whose awareness can give peace. And so, then I can go to be with my sister, I can go to be with my niece, I can be present to them in solidarity with them in this crisis of their physical being, but present to embody a love and a care and a concern which is the expression of that mystery of love that is God.

In our Christian tradition, the word became flesh. In a human face we saw God and not that God was in one human face, period, but that God has become human, God has come into expression in the human. God is expressed in you and in me. We are God-persons to one another, and the presence of God to one another, and the embodiment of compassion and love and the deep bonding of human relationship, and that's beautiful, and that's powerful. No matter what the existential circumstance, to be able to break through to that sense of the presence of a God who is the mystery of life and love - that's powerful.

There are a lot of studies being done, currently one underway at Harvard, a huge study on the connection of prayer and healing, and the evidence has come in that there is a therapeutic effect in worship, devotion, a life of prayer. But, I don't want to put it on that basis. I don't want to sell you on prayer; I don't want to sell you on worship, because it's good for you. Whatever happens that is good is a by-product of the wonder of the experience of God, of being at one with the whole scheme of things which is the scheme of things whose font is God, God that inexhaustible, infinite source and ground of all that is, to be aware that I am embraced, that I am a part of and bound to those I love with a kind of community that is deeper than words can describe. To come to that is to come to amazement, to come to peace, and to know that all, all will be well. Of course, it will, because all together we are in the embrace of that mysterious love coming to expression in a process that is full of beauty and full of terror, but which embraced and experienced in the humanity of the other, in the bonds of love, in the mystery of compassion, enables one to say, "All is well. All is well."

Prayer changes people, and I said "Prayer Changes People" because when I wrote that down some weeks ago, it was over against "Prayer Changes Things." But, this

is the irony -when once I break through to that sense of being secured and that loving mystery I call God, and I am changed. Reality just may change, as well.

I looked at my sister on Thursday and two weeks ago she was so terribly sick. Through competent medical care and the loving ministry of the Hospice people getting her taken care of, the morphine patch to relax and to cut the pain, to look at her and see her smile, to know her peace, I could say to her, "You know, you just might be peaceful enough to reverse that whole cancerous process." And it could happen. I don't know how it happens. I don't know what happens when we pray, when we pray in our words and our body language and our presence in the yearning depths of our hearts, I don't know what happens. Who knows what that positive yearning affects since we are all interlaced into a continuous reality, since we are all part of that web of being, who knows what my love and concern and compassion may affect beyond me?

Jeremiah was a theist, I think. He wouldn't like my transformed image of God, for the God of Israel was sovereign of history who set the boundaries and determined the destiny of nations, but Jeremiah was simply imagining God in his way. The important thing is not that image; the important thing is that Jeremiah had a basic, fundamental trust in God. In the midst of the darkness of the Exile, he trusted in God, he believed in God, he trusted in light, in love, and the purposes that are endemic to the whole scheme of things. And so, he said, "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans of good and not for evil to give you a future and a hope."

I'll tell you what –I lived my life for several years on that text. You see, the biblical images that are so beautiful and powerful are poetry. They are the poetry of the soul -God's eye is on the sparrow, the very hairs of your head are numbered, your name is engraven in the palm of God's hand. Images, images that point to something profound and deep that you can trust, and if you can trust, you can resign yourself in peace and life becomes a prayer and your presence to one who is suffering is a prayer, and your presence to those who celebrate a child is a prayer. Prayer which arises out of that fundamental trust - that changes people.

So, then, pray without ceasing.