

Sermon – “Prayer”

Saturday, July 13, 2019

Scripture Readings: Acts 10:1-8, John 17:1-11

Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading comes from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, a narrative from the time of the very early church. It tells the story of a gentile—a centurion—who has shown faithfulness and who is given a vision to call upon and learn from the apostle Peter. Listen for God’s word to you in Acts 10, verses 1 through 8.

10:1 In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o’clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?”

He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

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Our second reading comes from near the end of the final night before the crucifixion of Jesus, in the story of the Last Supper as told by John. After a very long farewell discourse given to his closest followers, here Jesus turns and offers prayer to God the Father. Hear God’s Word in John chapter 17, verses 1 through 11.

17:1 After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, ² since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. ³ And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. ⁴ I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.

⁶ “I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

I'd like to talk today about something I suspect all of us have wondered about. One of the basic, regular practices of Christians has always been prayer. For thousands of years people have been praying to the God spoken of in the Bible. And yet, even after all this time, prayer remains something incredibly mysterious.

Now, whole libraries could be filled with the books that have been written on prayer, so we're not going to solve very many of the mysteries here in these few minutes. But I would like to at least begin to touch on one question we have all likely struggled with in our approach to prayer.

Now, one thing I discovered well before I was ordained, pretty much as soon as I began seminary, is that when people find out you are a minister or studying to become one, you very quickly become a lightning rod for all their questions and thoughts about God and the church. That's great, because it can allow for a lot of good and deep conversations. But it also means you get put on the spot with some of the really tough paradoxes and mysteries of the faith. Now I love hard questions, but not because I thoroughly know the answers. Most of the hard questions, in fact, have been asked and argued and probed and discussed for millennia, which is another way of saying that the great leaders, preachers, theologians, and writers of the church have never entirely and definitively answered them across all those years.

No, I love hard questions because they tend to matter, and because I usually have the same questions, and I too would like to explore how to answer them. So as the starting point for us today, allow me to quote verbatim a question I got from somebody once. "Prayer. Why do we have to pray. God knows everything and loves us right? If I am extremely sick He knows it so prayer is not informing Him of the problem. If no one prays for me does He just say, well I guess no one likes him so screw him?"

That hits upon a hard issue, one that is kind of hard to avoid if we take prayer seriously at all. If prayer "works", that suggests it has some effect. Which is another way of saying something is different than it would have been if the prayers had not occurred. But if that is true—and I'm speaking mainly about intercessory prayer here; that is, prayer for the needs of others—then we are essentially claiming the following: God helps people when we ask—great! But also, that when we do not ask, God does not help as much. This is...less great-sounding. If the Lord loves everyone, why would God help the people who get prayed for and ignore the ones who have nobody praying for them? Isn't it bad enough that their fellow people aren't thinking of them? Why would God follow suit? Why would a good and loving, all-powerful God who already sees and knows everyone's needs refuse to fulfill them for someone unless that person gets prayed for?

Now people go in different directions when they come up against this. It would seem to call into question whether God is really good and loving, for one thing. Or perhaps, for some, it suggests that maybe God doesn't really know everything until told of it. Or is God not all-powerful, somehow limited and unable to accomplish certain things without the help of our prayer?

For a lot of people, though, I think this issue really calls into question the whole existence of the God we proclaim as Christians. If we say God is all those things—not only powerful and loving, but also all-knowing—and yet we also say that we need specifically to ask God for our needs and those of our neighbors, suggesting that this supposedly loving God won't help people if we don't care about them or inform heaven of their needs, then are we really making sense? Maybe we're just proving that Christianity has an incoherent understanding of God and is therefore not to be taken seriously.

So this is a question we can't ignore. It is a confusing area of our faith, not only an obstacle to nonbelievers, but something which trips up many of us inside the church as well in our ability to have strong prayer practices. If we can't understand how the good God we proclaim could have the relationship with prayer that is built into the way we typically talk about prayer, we are going to have an unavoidably hard time with that part of our faith lives.

So how do we approach this question? All the conflicting elements seem unavoidable.

"All things are possible with God," Jesus says.¹ Straightforwardly he asserted that God had power over everything. Indeed, this is a God the Bible says split the Red Sea,² knocked down the walls of Jericho,³ brought back people from the dead,⁴ and created the whole universe.⁵ It is hard to argue that, within a Christian conception of God, we could claim that God is somehow limited in power, incapable of performing miracles except with the help of our prayers.

We also can't eliminate God's omniscience. When Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he told them not to pile up words, as God knows their needs before they even say them.⁶ The prophets issued warnings and predictions from God of many things to come which later came to pass. The God spoken of in the Bible not only knows everything about the present, but the future as well.

And God's goodness, justice, and mercy are perhaps the most common themes in the entire Bible.

Without tossing out an awful lot of scripture, we can't portray God as lacking power, knowledge, or goodness. So again we ask, how is it that this God could refuse to help the needy unless someone prays for them?

I'll warn you before we get any further...remember how I said the hard questions remain hard questions because nobody has ever entirely answered them? Living in this universe has a large number of mysteries, and I hope that you will understand that we won't have arrived by the end of this sermon at a nice, complete answer suitable for framing and hanging on your wall. But we might be able to see at least a little bit of light through a little crack which I think exists, unnoticed, in one of the assumptions we tend to bring to this question.

¹ See Matthew 19:26.

² See Exodus 14:21-31.

³ See Joshua 6.

⁴ See for example the stories told at 1 Kings 17:24, 2 Kings 4:17-37, Luke 7:11-17, Luke 8:4-56, John 11:1-44, and of course the resurrection of Jesus himself as told of in numerous places including Matthew 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, and John 20.

⁵ See (among other places) Genesis 1.

⁶ "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

—Matthew 6:7-8 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

Let's take a little digression. Prayer is a strange, mysterious thing, hard to understand, so maybe we should start with something we can comprehend a little bit more easily. Let's forget about prayer for a moment and think about the physical world instead. We know quite a bit more about that.

We know, for instance, that the physical world we live in is governed by consistent rules about how things behave. If we pick something up and let go of it, it will fall back to the ground. If we apply force to something, it moves. In other words, physical things are predictable, and they are also causable. One thing happens because another thing happened first, and when the first thing is left undone, the second thing doesn't happen.

What that all means is that, for better or for worse, one of the characteristics of the universe in which we live is that it contains consequences. Everything that happens causes results. And since we have the will to choose what we do, and everything we do causes other things, we have the ability to bring about consequences, based on what we choose. Now, because we all live in the *same* universe with the *same* physical objects in it, we have the capability to inflict those consequences on each other. If I am standing at the bottom of the cliff, and someone drops an anvil off of it, I suffer from those consequences. If I am hungry, and nobody gives me food, I suffer the consequences.

Maybe you already see the parallel I am drawing us toward. We are asking how a good God who already knows our needs and is capable of solving them could sit back and let us suffer just because nobody prays for us. We find this odd...but perhaps we should not. The physical world already runs in much the same way as the very aspect of prayer we are puzzled about.

In looking at the physical world, we see that things have consequences, and we're quite used to that being the case. If I hit you, you hurt. If you need help, and I and all the other people look the other way, ignoring your need, you remain in need of help. You wouldn't blame these things on God; you would blame them on me, because it is my choices that led to your suffering. In other words, when looking at the material universe, we are quite accustomed to the notion that God has set up a shared world and a set of consistent rules which govern it, and does not for the most part change them. If you are starving, and I have the only food around, but I keep it all myself, the natural thing to expect is that you are going to die of hunger. We don't expect God to necessarily intervene and miraculously create food for you; rather, we know that God has given us free will and that includes the ability to harm one another through our actions or inactions.

And if we are more or less used to this notion when it comes to the material elements of the world in which we live, it is at least conceivable that we should also not be terribly surprised at it holding true in the prayer world as well. If someone is sick, and we do not pray for him, and he is not healed, is this *altogether* different from the situation where someone is hungry and we do not give her food, and she starves? Is God being unloving here, or are we? If prayer "works" in anything like the way we typically imagine, then the Lord has provided the means for us to help one another by offering some of God's own power to be put to use at our request. Just as in the material space, God has given ways to help meet one another's needs, and if we withhold them, we can hardly blame God.

Now this of course doesn't even begin to touch many of the closely related questions about prayer, such as how it works, what it means for it to "work," why God would choose to work through prayer, or why sometimes God grants what we ask and sometimes not. But those are topics for another day. Right now we're just asking the question of how God could allow people to suffer just because they are not prayed for, a part of the greater question of whether our conception of prayer makes sense.

So maybe this is at least a little piece of something helpful. God has elected to create a world full of free-willed creatures, a shared world, one in which we can bless one another, which means we are also capable of shortchanging each other. If we can let each other down by our material inaction, maybe it should not surprise us that we can leave each other in the lurch by spiritual inaction as well.

In the first scriptural passage we heard today, the angel appears to Cornelius and says the following: "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God."⁷ If we think about what that says, it suggests something we might not notice at first glance. Cornelius's prayers and his physical actions (that is, his gifts to the poor) are both treated as if they are the same sort of thing.

Both of them have come up to God as an offering. Both of them seem to be valid acts, in accordance with God's desires, both of them are apparently ways of accomplishing some good, good that presumably would otherwise not have been, and they are lauded together. If Cornelius had not given to the poor, they might have suffered more. If he had not prayed...well, we don't know what purposes his prayers accomplished, but for God to treat them the same way as his alms suggests strongly that they, too, accomplished something real, of which God approved.

One of the most intriguing things about the Gospel record of Jesus is that he, too, prays. He prays for himself, and he prays for his disciples.⁸ If Jesus Christ thought that mattered, then I suppose we should, too. We might not know the first thing about praying well,⁹ nor about recognizing God's hearing of our prayers. We don't even know enough about what is best in the world to recognize when what we are asking for is the right thing to ask for. And of course we share the world with others, so there are conflicting forces and wills at play. Our efforts on someone's behalf may well be fighting someone else's choices that are hurting the same person. (And if prayer indeed matters, this conflict may well exist in both the natural and supernatural arenas.)

So we surely cannot say we understand any of this thoroughly. But we can say that we are given choices, with consequences. God has given us material blessings and abilities with which we can provide for each other, and prayer with which we can apparently do the same.

⁷ From Acts 10:3-4 (NRSV).

⁸ Jesus prays for help for his disciples in today's reading from John 17. He prays for his own situation in Matthew 26 and Luke 22. He seems to be meeting his own needs in prayer in Mark 1:35 and Luke 5:16. There are numerous other examples of Jesus praying prayers of praise and thanksgiving as well.

⁹ Paul names this and offers some hope in his letter to the Romans: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is in the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." —Romans 8:26-27 (NRSV).

God has given us free will with both, with our physical acts and our acts of prayer, and whatever consequences flow from our choices with each. So let us not hold back from either one. Let us fully apply ourselves to doing good in both spaces, and let our giving to those in need and our prayers rise up, joyfully and faithfully, before God as an offering. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.