

WRESTLING WITH PRAYER

Sermon for Pentecost 22C-Gen 32:22-31, Lk18:1-8 (Proper 24)

LPC, 10/16/16

What do you do when you pray hard for something and it doesn't happen? Well, there are several ways you might react.

The simplest reaction would be to conclude that God does not exist. This is the conclusion reached by many so-called "modern" persons. This conclusion certainly passes the "Occam's razor test:" that the simplest explanation is often the best.

When you think about, it's kind of ironic that in this age of advanced knowledge and awareness of life's complexities, people should opt for the most simplistic explanation for unanswered prayer. After all, the theory that the sun revolved around the earth was once also the simplest, most self-evident explanation for the cycle of day and night. Now we know better. The more we humans learn about the universe, the more we realize that things are often more complicated than they seem.

Another theory for why our prayers may not be answered as we wish is that God is mean, or simply doesn't care about us. Some of the myths of polytheistic religions suggest this. According to Greek or Roman mythology, for example, the gods carried on lives of their own without much mucking about in human lives, unless, of course, a beautiful human woman or youth caught their eye. Then the gods' actions tended to be anything but benevolent.

Hebrew and Christian scriptures tell us something different about our God. Our God is intimately concerned with human life, and desires our welfare. Our God has a purpose for creation and we human beings are part of it. Our God tells us to pray always and not lose heart.

If we, as believers, accept these premises, then we need another explanation for apparently unanswered prayer. One way that many believers make sense of "unanswered" prayer is by concluding that they have somehow been bad and displeased God, and that therefore they are being disciplined by not being given what they want.

This is a very primitive belief that has more in common with cultures that throw virgins into volcanoes to appease God's anger than it does with Christianity. But this attitude is surprisingly prevalent, even among Christians, especially when we are under stress. Most prayers of the heart are, after all made in situations of great stress. People think, "Something bad has happened to me: what have I done?" Or conversely, "I'm a good person. Why am I being punished?"

If you missed my sermon of two weeks ago, I'm not going to preach it again. But my point then was that God's grace is freely given but never earned. One corollary to this is that being good is no guarantee against misfortune. Certainly history, our own experience, and the life of Jesus himself show us that bad things sometimes happen to good people. Grave illness or misfortune is rarely, if ever, God's punishment for misdeeds. Likewise, not having our prayers answered as we wish is no proof that God is mad at us.

The more sophisticated among us will explain “unanswered” prayer by rationalizing that God has other plans for us. After all, a loving parent does not give a child everything he or she asks for. Likewise, God’s perspective is much greater than ours. God’s purpose is to redeem all of creation. Although our problems seem monumental to us, they assume a different priority when your scope is the entire universe, as God’s is.

This explanation has considerable merit. But it may be cold comfort when we are suffering. Of greater comfort is the reminder that Christ suffered too, and promises to accompany us into our own suffering. This is a true saying and worthy of all to be received.

But am I going to give a definitive explanation for unanswered prayer? You know me better than to expect a simple, memorable answer. What I suggest instead is an expansive definition of prayer.

We tend to think of prayer as asking for something: “God bless Mommy and Daddy.” “Help me get this job I want.” “Please keep my children safe.” “Don’t let my spouse die.” I want to emphasize that these are all good and genuine prayers. They are prayers of the heart. Scripture tells us to make our cares and supplications known to God. We must pray honestly, and if a prayer like this is foremost in our minds it would be dishonest not to bring it before God.

What I suggest is that this type of supplication is just one type of prayer. There is another understanding of prayer that applies to every kind of prayer. Prayer is not just making our cares and supplications known to God. Prayer is engagement with God.

Here is where the story from Genesis is, and has always been, especially meaningful to me. This story is known as “Jacob Wrestling with the Angel,” but the character is defined only as “a man.” Clearly, however, this is no ordinary man, but some manifestation of God. At the end of the story we are told Jacob has “striven with God and with humans.” The “man” will not give his name. Being unnamable is one of the Hebrew God’s markers. And Jacob believes he has seen God face to face.

Jacob’s experience tells us many things about prayer, if we understand prayer as engagement with God. Engagement with God does not always give us what we want. Engagement with God is often a struggle. Engagement with God sometimes leaves us with a new name, like Jacob’s being called “Israel” for the first time. Engagement with God sometimes marks us for life, as Jacob’s limp did.

What this suggests to me is first, God is not always an easy companion, but that the struggle is holy. Secondly, God does not particularly want to be a cosmic vending machine, where we only come when we need something. It’s OK if we do that, but God has another type of relationship in mind. God wants us to engage with God. God is sort of like that terrific high school teacher who loves it when he or she is challenged in class, because it shows we are using our minds, taking the material to heart.

Prayer is engagement with God. And it is this type of prayer that we are to do always and not lose heart. This type of prayer may mark us forever, but it is never, ultimately, unanswered.