

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Charles M. Cary
Sermon: "Questions People Ask VIII: The Mystery of Unanswered Prayer"
August 27 2017
Psalm 4 James 5:13-18

Prayer is less transaction, and more conversation between us and God,
getting us to what we need rather than what we want.

Joyce Sickles asks the question we all have asked at one time or another. After Bill's health scare this spring, and the outpouring of love and prayers (that have certainly been answered) here's what she says: "What about prayers which go unanswered?" You know what she means. You might have prayed for a loved one to heal, and he/she did not. You might have prayed for peace and reconciliation in the world, and the outcome was anything but...you might have prayed for a young person – a son or daughter – to get back on the right track toward happiness. There was only sadness. You might have prayed for your church to be renewed – but it wasn't renewed.

Is there an explanation for why some prayers are answered while others are not? The issue reminds me of a story told by an elder I knew. The late Byron Chandler.

Byron was single and living the good life in New York City. He loved Broadway and its glitz and glitter. He also loved the New York Yankees and the Yankee Clipper – Joe DiMaggio. Byron was tall, and someone in the airport once mistook him for Joe – which delighted him to no end. He was an Army veteran and loved his church, loved his country.

But it didn't start out that way. He was, by his own admission not much of a church-goer. He grew up in the Presbyterian congregation in Valley Stream – but left after Confirmation. He didn't say his prayers. He didn't think much about God or God's people. This was before the phrase "spiritual but not religious" came into conversation. Byron was neither.

One fine Sunday he was walking on Madison Avenue. The weather was clear and glorious. He approached the open doors of Madison Avenue Presbyterian church, and something, or someone (we should say) led him to go inside and find a pew in the back. The organ prelude was in full gear and Byron soon became lost in the sacred music. Time went by – and it wasn't until someone tapped him on his shoulder – that Byron came to, realizing that this was the first time he had prayed in years. This friend apologized for startling him- Byron was grateful. This time of reentry, of contemplation – was like a return home. Byron describes it as a time of finding what had been missing in his life.

His journey of faith continued. Becoming active in Alcoholics Anonymous when alcohol began to control him. He loved the spiritual basis of AA – always saying The Lord's Prayer: and the Serenity Prayer.

*"God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, Courage to change the things we can.
And wisdom to know the difference."*

In Byron's case his prayers were answered. Not with what he wanted, necessarily – but what he needed! Reconnecting. Restoring that relationship that by his own admission he had lost. Byron's answer to today's question – it's not always about what we want – so much as about what we need.

The passages for today – from Psalm 4 and James 5 presume something central, at the core of what we believe. Prayer is the connection between us and our maker, the bridge which unites us rather than divides us. The conversation between creator and the created. The unifying word between God and humanity!

Our prayers are inspired by God in the first place – just as Byron was led by a mysterious draw to enter the Madison Avenue Presbyterian church on a beautiful Sunday. They include Thanksgiving, confession, petition- They include emotions of joy, solemnity, and yes – in the hour of grief – lamentation or crying out. Our prayers do not always lead to getting what we want. They do – I believe- lead to the revelation of what we need. The Danish Theologian Soren Kierkegaard said that prayer doesn't so much change God as change us – drawing us closer to the Lord we love – who first loved us!

Jesus prayed. He prayed in the wilderness – for 40 days/40 nights where He was tested. He also prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane while His disciples abandoned Him in His difficulty. Luke 22:42 "Father – if thou be willing – remove this cup from me...nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." The remarkable concession: If it is God's will for Him to drink of this cup, then so be it! Sometimes what we want and what God may want are not the same. We nevertheless continue to pray to Him. From the cross Jesus prays often. "Father forgive them, they know not what they do!" "Father into your hands I commend my Spirit." His prayers are interwoven with His

love. His words, His earnest words demand our attention- for they reveal what it means to follow the Lord wherever He leads – even if it is to a place He and we would rather avoid!

Sometime our prayers go unanswered not because of the weakness of God. They are unanswered because we are incapable of seeing or discerning what God is saying, what God is doing. Sometimes, we are the ones who run out of patience; believing that God’s timetable should match exactly our own. Father – if thou be willing, remove this cup from me – nevertheless, not my will but thine be done!

Two stories about prayer and its importance as the church’s practice – one from fiction and one from the aftermath of 9/11 – the first Robinson Crusoe – the adventurer who suddenly finds himself alone, marooned on a deserted island. Early in his saga he catches the flu. Deathly ill he cries out – “Lord, look upon me, Lord pity me, Lord have mercy upon me!!” It was by his own admission the first prayer he had said in years. It led him to a time of turning, or repentance in which he cries out – Lord be my help! For I am in great distress!! It was a watershed – and the moment Robinson began to see how he was held captive spiritually – as well as physically – or by his geography. He got better – leaving behind the flu – but in his healing he began to see evidence of God’s grace, in the Bible he had brought with him which managed to retain its clarity – its legibility. In the surrounding beauty of nature – the capacity of his island home to yield fruit and sustenance. In overcoming his fear – and replacing it with confidence. God’s grace in his own conversion – which made him a better man. One writer compares Crusoe to a monk who dedicated himself to a life of prayer and manual labor! What about unanswered prayer in his life? In his case the answer he looked for pales in comparison to the wider answer God gave him. Crusoe’s is a life which gives definition to the saying “Be careful what you pray for: it will most likely lead to the realization of blessings even more abundant!”

A second story. Twelve days after 9/11 an interfaith prayer service was held at Yankee Stadium. Thousands of people were there. Priests, ministers, Rabbis, and Imans filled the stage. Oprah Winfrey was there. Bette Midler sang. Many grieving families were there – still sorting out the new normal one associates with a death in the family. David Benke – president of the Atlantic District of Missouri – Synod Lutherans offered a prayer after asking everyone to join hands on what he called – “a field of dreams.” His choice of English would have caught the attention of my teachers and their red pens: O Heavenly Father – unbind, unfear, unscorch, unsear our souls.” He was positive and in many ways what he said struck the right tone for his audience! Vigorous applause followed.

But Benke’s prayer got him into trouble – and serves as a teachable moment for us as we consider Joyce Sickles’ question. Shortly after the event fellow Missouri Synod Lutherans accused him of heresy – because he shared the stage with non-Christians and other denominations! The next summer on June 25, he was suspended from his position – which caused an uproar. Still a pastor in his Brooklyn congregation, he came out swinging – triggering a 3 minute standing ovation the following Sunday and a guest appearance on PBS’s Frontline. Soon his popularity forced his superiors to overturn their decision. Benke became – to his surprise – a champion of ecumenical and interfaith prayer. Our prayers to the living God are what commit us to one another as well as to our maker. The prayer service following 9/11 was not another competition – to see whose prayers were superior, whose were inferior. It was a time to open our hearts – open our lives to the true God who blesses us with the capacity to carry on: The irony of it all, following 9/11 this nation was as united as ever. A unity which helped us regroup and move forward!! A part of the result from praying together.

Moderator Clinton Marsh declared in the late 1970’s that he wanted to see our Presbyterian denomination become a praying church once again. Such a call we can never take lightly. So in response to his call – and with gratitude for today’s question, I present the same invitation to you: Pray for the vitality, the mission, and ministry of First Presbyterian Church. Pray not that God will take whatever cup of sacrifice from us – Pray instead that God’s will is done, here at 2 South Main Street.

II – In your prayers – lift up the needs of the people listed in our prayer concerns. Also – offer thanks for blessings known and blessings unknown. After all – we believe that the Most High God is capable of bringing good out of evil- hope out of despair; healing out of brokenness. At least once in your day – offer “Thank you Lord!”

III – Pray for others by name, the children and youth of the church. I know we are all busy: Take time to ask God to nurture the faith of the next generation. Ask God to bless them.

Don’t fall silent. God is less worried about your word choice. He is more concerned about the direction of your heart!! Let it be said that this interim time witnessed the renewal of your spirits – and you rejoiced over the abundance of your blessings. When the search committee begins – let them know you pray for them.

The sermon series concludes today. I am grateful to God for your questions and trust that you have heard a word over the last 8 weeks which has renewed you. This congregation has a distinguished past and a bright future. As each new day unfolds, may there be an answer to your prayers – both an answer you expect, and

answers which surprise. One thing for sure – God is not finished with us. In the words of Scripture – He has only just begun!!

Source: Zaleski, Carol and Philip, *Prayer: A History*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company. 2005