

Prayer

January 5, 2020

I don't know how many of you are aware of it, but there is a box on the table outside the sanctuary named the "Prayer Box." Debra, bless her soul, regularly checks the Prayer Box to see if there are requests to be followed up on. Early in advent she checked the box on a Tuesday morning and found this small piece of paper with the following words written on it: "Why does prayer not work??" The word 'not' was underlined and two question marks indicated the urgency of the question. The Prayer Box allows for anonymity and so I do not know who wrote this note. My assumption is that it was penned by someone in the midst of a crisis.

As human beings we often turn to God in the midst of crisis. When we feel desperate, we turn to the Source of Life hoping that someone will, somehow, respond. We are familiar with the phrase, "There are no atheists in fox holes." Even those who spurn the idea of God in their daily life can be found beseeching God's assistance in a crisis. I call this the 'desperate person's prayer'. I have prayed such prayers. Waiting for the ambulance on the front steps of our house the night my father died, I prayed the desperate person's prayer; when Victoria was riddled with peritonitis, I prayed the desperate person's prayer. There have been other moments in my life, when anxiety mounts over a real or potential crisis, that I pray the desperate person's prayer. I make no apologies for such prayers and neither should you. In the midst of crisis, like the person in the fox hole, we somewhat intuitively call out to a power greater than ourselves. What distinguishes my 'desperate person's prayer' from my more ordinary prayer life is that I don't normally expect God to answer – that is to say, my rational mind doesn't really expect God to provide a magical intervention that suspends the laws of nature and changes the course of my life. After all, why should I expect God to 'magically' erase a cancer cell in my body when (according to the United Nations) 8300 children die each day from a lack of food? Am I really that special? Are those 8300 children really that irrelevant to God? Yet, in moments of crisis, I do not apologize for uttering the desperate person's prayer – such a prayer arises from an intuitive trust in a power greater than myself.

In 1983 I took my first course in Chaplaincy Education. The course was conducted at University Hospital and one of my supervisors was the United Church chaplain, the Rev. Dale Morrison. We were barely two weeks into the course when a request came to the Chaplain's office for someone to attend to a family in the Intensive Care Unit. Dale selected me. With trepidation I made my way to the ICU and found a family gathered around their middle-aged mother. The patient was to be extubated in a couple of hours with little hope of survival and the family wanted me to pray for their mother. Faced with such a critical situation, surrounded by strange machines and professional staff I mostly remember feeling anxious, uttering a short intercession and exiting the room. About three weeks later I received a call at home. The caller identified herself as the patient for whom I had prayed and she was phoning to thank me for saving her life. I do not pretend to know what happened for that woman. Was the medical staff wrong? Did the patient possess an unrecognized stamina that allowed

her to surmount her diagnosis? Did God intervene in a mystical and supernatural way that I don't understand? This experience, along with my own reaction to crisis, causes me to respect the 'desperate person's prayer.' Rest assured that if I, or someone I loved, found themselves on the precipice between life and death I would not hesitate to offer such a prayer.

For today, however, in a time of relative calm, I must admit that I do not expect God to answer such requests. As one who has come to believe that God is as much a verb as a noun; as much a source of the 'power to endure' than a magical interventionist, I don't expect God to answer my prayers by suspending the laws of nature, even when nature takes the form of an invasive cancer cell. There has been clinical research into the efficacy of prayer where certain patients were selected for prayer in a double blind study. Some of these studies suggest that the patients who were prayed for were discharged sooner with a better prognosis than those who did not receive prayer. Exacting researchers question the methodology of such studies. I am more inclined toward the conclusions of Dr. Harold Koenig, a well-known researcher from Duke University. After countless studies Dr. Koenig concluded that those with an active faith tend to have better health outcomes. He did not suggest that God intervened in a miraculous fashion but concluded that when one lives life with a degree of moderation, when one senses meaning and purpose in life, and when one is sustained by regular spiritual practices, overall health is enhanced and there is a greater likelihood of living longer and better.

Let us return to the question from the Prayer Box: "Why does prayer not work?" We could restate the question slightly to read "why doesn't prayer work the way I want it to?" or "why doesn't God provide miraculous interventions"? Some of you will remember a book popular in the 1980's written by a Jewish rabbi named Harold Kushner. Rabbi Kushner phrased his question this way: "Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" In his book Kushner asks why a loving and powerful God is not compelled to alleviate our suffering. Since challenge, crisis and suffering still exist he argues that we must relinquish one of two hypothesis – either God is powerful enough to eliminate our suffering but chooses not to OR God loves us passionately but doesn't have the power to alleviate our suffering. Rabbi Kushner chose the latter hypothesis – he chooses to believe that God is more loving than powerful. Kushner's book started me on a path to relinquishing the idea that there is an all-powerful God controlling the world and toward the belief that there is a God-power that is the source of love, courage, compassion and justice and hence the ultimate resource for the living of my days.

What does it mean to pray to the Source of love, courage, compassion and justice who is either self-limiting or who has never had the power to control our individual or corporate lives? What does it mean to pray to a power that wants to love us more than control us? What does it mean to pray to a God who has either set aside or never had the power to 'grant our wishes'?

The Christian church has identified many kinds of prayer such as prayers of approach, of illumination, of supplication, of mercy and the Great prayers of

Communion. Fortunately, in our Protestant tradition, three kinds of prayer stand out – confession, thanksgiving and intercession (or what we think of as asking prayers). To repeat the question from the Prayer Box, do these prayer work? Our friends in Alcoholics Anonymous are convinced that the prayer of confession works. They have imbedded confession into their twelve step program: #4 – Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves; #5 – Admitted to God and another the exact nature of our wrongs; #6 & 7 – asked God to remove our shortcomings; #8 & 9 – made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all; #10 – continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong to promptly admit it. This is confession and when we engage in confession with integrity, our life and the life of those around us improves. Does the prayer of confession work? Just ask someone who lives beyond their addiction and works the program, who lives the prayer of confession in their daily life.

Our second common prayer is one of thanksgiving. As I've already suggested, I believe prayer can be an intuitive and almost automatic response. Who has not greeted a prairie sunset or inhaled a spring morning or embraced a child or lover with a contented sigh and not experienced deep gratitude. Psychologists have come late to what people of prayer have always known – thankfulness (gratitude) is good for the soul. Our mental and physical life is enhanced when we offer thanks. A recent *Psychology Today* article notes:

(Gratitude) runs deep in evolutionary history—emanating from the survival value of helping others and being helped in return ... research demonstrates its value as a practice ... feeling grateful boosts happiness and fosters both physical and psychological health ... brain scans of people (expressing gratitude) show lasting changes in the prefrontal cortex that heighten sensitivity to future experiences of gratitude. The emotion literally pays itself forward.

It would appear that science confirms that prayers of thanksgiving work.

What about intercessory prayer – what happens when we ask God for something? If God is more a verb than a noun; if God is more loving than powerful; if God is more the source of love, courage, and compassion than of miracles, special requests, and favours, then why pray?

First, I pray to God because God is my best friend. In a time of crisis have you ever turned to a good friend for a listening ear? It is so important to be able to express ourselves, our tears, our fears and our hopes to someone we trust. Despite a few gems of shared wisdom, what I really appreciate from a good friend is their ability to listen. God has listened to me for most of the last 66 years and I am better for it.

Second, based on this morning's scripture in which Jesus suggests that God knows our prayers before we utter them, I have concluded that prayer is mostly about changing me not God. As I speak with God about my deepest desires I simultaneously reflect on my own life and needs. I get to 'try on' what it will be like if the crisis gets

worse. I get to voice my fears through a desperate person's prayer and start to build up the spiritual muscle to keep on keeping on. Prayer is often my way of working myself step by step from the challenge of crisis through to the other side. Prayer provides me the mental space to move from shock to acceptance and beyond.

Finally I think God who is the power of love does answer prayer – not through a magical intervention, but through the power of love, courage and compassion. In the midst of grief, when I had to transport my mother's body from Saskatoon to Regina for burial, Dave Grambo of McKagues stepped up and said he would personally undertake the task. I cried over his compassion. When my cousin's unexpected heart attack shocked me to the core, I sought out Ron McConnell hoping he might welcome my cousin's family to McClure – he did, and I cried. A God without the power of magic is not a God without power. The love and compassion we experience is the God power at work in our lives.

Let me close with two stories from my chaplain's diary. Carol was 47 when she learned that the lump in her breast was most likely malignant. Like most of us, when faced with a life-threatening situation, Carol turned to prayer. She prayed that the physicians were wrong, she prayed that there would be only minor surgery, she prayed that she would live. It was a couple of days before her discharge when I found her in her room. She was distant and cynical. It turned out that the malignancy had required a complete mastectomy and because of the nature of the cancer the surgeon suggested she consent to a double mastectomy. After some mutual introductions Carol declared, "I don't really believe in God. What good did prayer do for me?" I resisted being God's apologist, listened to her anger, and wished her well when she returned home.

It was the kind of visit I encountered from time to time but it stood out for me that day because of Deirdre. She occupied the room across the hall from Carol. I knew Deirdre better since she had been in the hospital for nearly a month. She was also preparing to go home, having completed some chemotherapy treatments in an attempt to keep her lung cancer at bay. Deirdre knew that her life was limited, but she seemed to possess a gentle peace about it. She spoke fondly about going home to the farm, yearning for a few quiet moments in that corner of her garden where she regularly communed with God. She had nurtured her faith, having read a lot of Bible stories in her role as Sunday School superintendent. We talked about God, and life, and life after death. Deirdre wasn't convinced about life after death, but still she was very thankful for the life that God had given her. God had not taken away her cancer – but God had been her intimate companion in the journey – and she felt blessed.

In my life I've discovered that prayer does work. I know it is not everyone's experience. And so I'm going to pray for you – that even in the midst of your deepest angst you might know God through the peace that passes all understanding. And as with all prayer it comes time to say, "Amen."

Rev. Brian Walton