

Prayer Matters

7 May 2006

(iGod and rock planting Sunday)

Bible passage: Isaiah 58:9 (*The Message*)

“Then when you pray, God will answer.

You’ll call out for help, and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’”

Sermon nugget: The essence of prayer is sharing with God, and listening to God’s response. Prayer can have a powerful impact on us.

There are several ways for us to understand the title of our service today. “Prayer Matters” could refer to the fact that most of us think that prayer makes a difference, in the way we live and in how life goes for us. That’s one way. We could also see that title as meaning the content or substance of prayers, as in trying to identify that about which we should be in prayer. Or, I suppose the title could also refer just to some general discussion about what prayer is, why pray, and things like that. In essence, it’s probably going to be about all three, but more some general thoughts about the value of prayer, and ideas about what prayer might be like.

For starters, I looked up prayer in the dictionary, and even though I had always learned that you can’t define a word with the word, that’s precisely what Webster does! “To pray” is defined as “to say a prayer, as to God.” Hummmm. As I looked farther, I found that a prayer can be: “an earnest request, a humble and sincere request, as to God, an utterance in praise, thanksgiving, confession, etc., as to God,” or “a set formula for praying.”

Well, that doesn’t really tell us much, does it? I guess the way that I usually think of prayer is that it is conversation with God. We share with God the concerns we have, the hopes and dreams we harbor, the fears that daunt us, the wrongs we have done, and more. That’s often where many of our prayers stop. We sort of dump all our baggage, and then go on about our business.

However, that’s only one part of prayer, just as talking is only one part of any conversation. Prayer involves interaction and listening. Good communication means being attentive to the responses we receive, and to be able to absorb and reflect what we hear or see. Prayer is definitely a two-way proposition, and if we only state our concerns and needs, we’ve left out an essential part of the process!

Part of the assumption is that prayer has to do somehow with God, but our Bible passage for this morning might help us in looking at something else. Our version is from *The Message*, and in it, God is saying: “Then when you pray, God will answer. You’ll call out for help, and I’ll say, ‘Here I am.’”

Those words, in and of themselves, offer reassurance that when we pray to God, God will be there to hear our prayers.

In one of her books, Mother Theresa echoed the same sentiment. She said, “God hears all prayers.” Sometimes the awareness that our prayers are really heard can make all the difference!

There’s another part to praying, however. The parts of Isaiah 58 that precede and follow our passage also indicate that it’s important for us to pray to God in the right spirit. The earlier part of the passage talks about the fasting that was going on in preparation for prayer, but the show of “holy” rituals and activities can belie the reality. Isaiah is pointing out that those who flaunt their fasting the most are also the ones who treat their employees in harsh ways. The passage reads, “You fast, but you swing a mean fist.” (Is 58:4)

When we come before God in prayer, we need to be conscious of the spirit in which we come. If we come to God filled with any arrogance or viciousness or ill intent, then we’re not praying in the best spirit. However, when we present ourselves humbly and honestly before God, showing care and generosity toward our fellow human beings, that’s when God’s promise to be there for us, and to hear us will ring true.

There’s something else to think about when it comes to prayer, and that has to do with the answers we receive, or maybe the ones we aren’t aware of receiving, or maybe the answers that we think we never get. I had a friend who used to say that God answers us one of three ways: yes, no, or not now. I can’t tell you that I’ve ever received quite so clear a response as any of those three, and yet, I’m firmly convinced that God responds to our prayers. It’s just that, in my experience, the response doesn’t come in the form of yes or no answers. That’s one of the reasons that being quiet, and listening and looking for God’s response are so important.

It’s helpful to remember that’s God may be responding to us in some surprising ways. Sometimes, God may be reaching us through our ideas and inspirations, or some new insight we find. That’s why we have to be quiet—so we can get those ideas and insights.

God may be answering us through an internal voice, or inner sense, guiding us in this direction rather than that one. Sometimes we hear God’s voice through other people—through their words or actions. And perhaps there are times that things just “work out,” and there seems to be no real explanation. That’s part of the mystery of prayer.

I know many who experience God’s response through nature. For instance, Mary Oliver, in *The Summer Day*, wrote, “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields...” There are those of us who experience God’s answer to our prayers through the beauty of the world

around us, or through the strains of music, or in the wonder of an artist's strokes on canvas.

A couple of years ago, someone sent me a forwarded email on spiritual parenting, and it had to do with prayer. One part of the email used the story of the *Wizard of Oz* as an analogy to prayer. At first, I thought this was a little far-fetched, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it made to me. You may recall that in the story, Dorothy wished to go home to Kansas; the Scarecrow wished for a brain; the Tin Man wished for a heart; the Cowardly Lion wished for courage.

The question that the article asked was, "Are those wishes prayers?" Do we pray for the things we want most? Is that what prayer is? I've always believed that we can go to God with any request, but probably our prayers should be about the things that matter most to us, and not so much about the little things that we can manage on our own.

The article took the analogy of prayer with the *Wizard of Oz* a bit farther, noting that the Wizard asked that Dorothy bring him the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West. As the commentary stated, prayer is "not a way to avoid taking responsibility or hiding from the things that scare us." It's not sitting back and watching some mighty force take over. It means that we pray for that which we care most about, and then we dig in and work alongside God to bring that reality into being.

Praying doesn't exempt us from anything. Instead, it may well mean action on our part. I really believe that we are co-creators with God, and that we can't expect God to be like a Santa Claus who fills our wish list. If we find ourselves in any difficult situation, and seek God's help, we mustn't expect God to magically take the hurt or difficulty away. Rather, we may well expect that God will give us the courage or strength, or whatever it is we need, to deal with whatever dilemma we face. God can fill us with whatever we need to accomplish the task at hand.

Prayer is important, and it seems to me that making time each and every day to pray to God changes our lives in dramatic ways. Prayer changes the one who prays, in that prayer can have a very calming, centering, peaceful impact on our lives. Prayer can transform our attitudes and perspectives about other people and some of life's situations. It gives us a new way of seeing things.

Someone gave me a little book entitled, *It's Not Easy Being Green*. As you might have figured out, the nuggets in this book were gems from the originator of the Muppets, Jim Hensen, the Muppets themselves, and friends of Hensen and the Muppets. In the book, Hensen shared that he began each day in meditation and prayer, and he acknowledged that this helped him get a good start on the day.

I thought that what he prayed for was interesting. He said, "I thank whoever is helping me—I'm sure somebody or

something is—I express gratitude for all my blessings and I try to forgive the people that I'm feeling negative towards. I try hard not to judge anyone, and I try to bless everyone who is a part of my life, particularly anyone with whom I am having any problems." I really like what he had to say, and wonder if maybe some of his thoughts aren't helpful to you and to me as we consider our own prayer life.

You know, we could talk *about* prayer all morning, but that defeats the purpose. Just as it's important to communicate regularly with someone we love and care about in order to have a good, solid relationship, so, too, is it vital to have regular communication with God. The words don't matter; the way we pray doesn't matter. What counts is that our hearts are open to share with God, and to hear what God is offering us. Let's take a moment now, each of us in our own way, and spend some time with God in prayer.

(A couple minutes of silence....)

Someone gave me a prayer that's called the Prayer of St. Theresa. I like a lot of what it has to say, but I've modified it a bit to make it more personal. It will be on screen, and I'd like to invite you to pray it with me:

God, let us have peace within today. May we trust you that we are exactly where we are meant to be, and that we not forget all the possibilities that come with faith. Enable us to use the gifts that we have received from you, and to pass on the love that we have been given. Help us know in our hearts that we are your children and that you live within us. Allow our souls the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. Thank you, God. Amen.

CLOSING:

As we leave here this morning, I hope, and I pray that God will hear our prayers, and that we will hear and see God's response to us.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.