

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PRAYER III
The Third Sunday in Lent

03/20/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139:1-12
Romans 8:26-27, 35-39

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time to prepare for the celebration of Easter. It is also a time to embark upon a spiritual journey, a journey that will hopefully end with the death of our “old self” and our rebirth or resurrection in Christ!

In our worship services this Lenten season we are thinking about prayer. I hope our reflections will lead us to a deeper understanding of the meaning and power of prayer, will lead us to believe more fully in the power of intercessory prayer, and will lead us to pray more constantly and more meaningfully in our daily life.

Following my reflection last week, I received several responses. Some listeners or readers said they loved my sermon, and one said she would love to have a study group where we could explore what kind of God we worship, where we can try to pierce the great mystery of God. I would be happy to—as soon as the numbers go down a little more. Several found my thoughts challenging or disturbing, especially my suggestion that God is limited in what God can do, i.e., my assertion that for God some things are impossible. One of you even quoted several verses in the Bible that assure us that “for God, all things are possible.”

I loved the feedback, even or especially from those of you who disagreed with me. I see no reason why you all must agree with your pastor and each other on matters of faith; that would be boring and would not be conducive to growth. I like the quote from Joseph Campbell, who said, “Heresy is the lifeblood of the church; orthodoxy is its death.” I would encourage us to look at matters of faith from different perspectives in the hope that, by challenging an infantile or outgrown schema, we might move a little deeper in understanding the great mystery of God.

When I utilize a silly or facetious example, as I did last week with the parking meter, I hope you understand that I am not being disrespectful of the Christian faith or your faith. I am just being playful! However, I hope that my silly example might make you think, might make you question something you never thought to question. I firmly believe, following Paul Tillich in his book *Dynamics of Faith*, that doubt is an important part of the spiritual journey.

But first I would like to respond to those of you who contend that “for God all things are possible.” I, of course, believe that for God all things are possible—except those things that are impossible. Please bear with me as I give you another silly example.

If I ask you what word describes our belief that God is all powerful, that God can do anything, you would probably say it is the belief that God is omnipotent. Then I would ask you, if God is truly omnipotent, could God build a stone wall? After a moment's hesitation, you would probably reply in the affirmative; if God wanted to build a stone wall, he could do it.

Then I would ask you whether God could build a stone wall so high that he could not jump over it. Now, you have a problem. If God could build a stone wall so high that he could not jump over it, then God would be limited by his inability to jump over the wall. If he couldn't build such a wall, then God would again be limited.

Please, I know this is a silly example! I am asking you to consider how God could do two things that are mutually exclusive, how God could do something that is impossible. Let me say that, personally, I find that God's inability to do something that is logically impossible is of little importance in helping me to deepen my relationship with God and become more aware of how God works in my life and in the world. Second, I would ask you what you were picturing when I gave you the example. Were you picturing a very big, very powerful man (or woman) who builds big stone walls? Were you picturing a person who could not only jump, but jump very high? If so, I would suggest that you challenge your schema, your picture of God. To quote the theologian J. B. Phillips, I would suggest that "your God is too small."

This morning I would like us to think about how our understanding of prayer shapes our understanding of God and how our understanding of God shapes our understanding of prayer by examining the picture or concept of God that is articulated in the 139th Psalm and in the passage of scripture we heard this morning from Paul's letter to the church at Rome.

How do you picture God? When you pray to God, what sort of image do you hold in your mind's eye? It should not be surprising that different people have different pictures of God. Some picture God as a fatherly-type white man with a beard sitting on a throne up above the clouds. In *The Shack*, a novel that explores tragedy and evil from a Christian perspective, God is depicted as a black woman. Some find it difficult to picture God, so they pray to Jesus. Some pray to God as the Holy Spirit, a light or an energy field that connects everyone and that flows up inside each person.

It is not surprising that different people have different pictures or images of God. If I hold this book in front of you and ask you what you see, what would you say? You would probably say you see a black cover with lots of words, a picture of Joseph Campbell, and a bar code. The book, by the way, is Joseph Campbell's *Historical Atlas of World Mythology*, Volume II: The Way of the Seeded Earth, Part 1: The Sacrifice.

If I were to ask you if you see the magnificent painting by Christoforo Simone dei Crocefissi entitled "The Dream of the Virgin," what would you say? The painting, which is encased in a wooden frame, was painted by the Bolognese artist around 1350 C.E. It depicts Mary, her head surrounded by a halo, lying on a bed sleeping, attended by a woman who is

seated at her head reading a book. Out of Mary's body, a tree grows, probably the Tree of Life that, as it grows, takes the form of a cross or, more accurately, a crucifix with Christ's body, his corpus, on it, thus becoming the Tree of Redemption. Above the crucifixion scene, at the top of the painting, at the top of the tree, standing on its nest, is a pelican, which, according to the nature lore of the European Middle Ages, nourishes its young on blood drawn from its own breast—as Christ, through the giving of his Holy Blood, has nourished humanity to salvation. The pelican is drawing blood from its breast by its beak and is using it to feed the baby pelicans in the nest.

Once again, if I were to ask you if you see this, what would you say? You would probably say that you don't see it. Why don't you see it? It is as plain as the nose on my face! It is obvious to me that I have the correct picture of this book while your picture, since it differs from mine, must be in error.

How could we resolve the matter of who has the correct picture, the one true picture of this book? Since our descriptions differ, how could we both be correct? Shouldn't there be just one true picture of the book?

I could argue with you and try to convince you that my picture is the correct picture and that you are in error. If I had enough power, I could torture you until you recanted and admitted that you see the book as I do. We could go to war over it. I might even kill you just because your picture of the book differs from mine.

Do any of these seem like a good idea? Well, the three major monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have tried them repeatedly throughout history. And I agree. They don't sound very good to me!

You don't have to be a philosopher to understand that there is no single true picture of this book. It depends on our perspective in relation to the book. It depends on our experience of the book. Each of us has only a partial picture of the book. If we look at the book from different perspectives, if we listen carefully to each other, and if we are open to the different ways that we experience the book, our picture will be more inclusive than if we cling to our perspective as the only true picture just because it is real and meaningful to us.

By the way, I believe that this is the most constructive way, perhaps the only constructive way that we can resolve the tribalistic dichotomizations that have split and polarized social and political dialogue within this country. Perhaps we can explore this approach in more depth some other time. Let me just recommend a book to you: *The Three Languages of Politics* by Arnold Kling. This book has recently been added to the very high pile of books we *really* need to read and discuss in our Tuesday afternoon study group when it resumes.

If we can have different perspectives of something as simple as this book, perceptions and understandings that arise from different yet valid experiences of this book, what makes us

think that God can be described from a single perspective? Isn't God more complex than this book? Isn't God a *lot* more complex?

This book is a thing that we can place or locate in space and time. God is not a thing among other things in the universe, a thing or a person which is in one place but not another. We experience this book through our senses. Our experience of God is different. We experience God not only through our senses, but also through our heart. When we open our heart to God we experience God's comforting, healing presence and we become open to the many ways that God seeks to guide the unfolding of our life. I also have a sense that our tendency to turn God into a noun rather than a verb is part of our problem.

Let's think about the implications of the 139th Psalm and the passage from Romans for our picture of God and our understanding of the power of prayer.

In those difficult moments when we are struggling with life, we often feel alone. Other people may care about us and for us, but because we have withdrawn from life, we cannot feel it. Other people may love us, but because we feel unlovable, we cannot believe it. There may be a meaning and purpose to our life, but when we are depressed, we cannot find it. There may be options for change, doors through which we might walk, but when we are in the throes of despair, we have no hope. We see no door, no path that leads to a brighter future. We glimpse no light at the end of the tunnel.

The great spiritual men and women of our religious tradition call this grey-black experience the "wilderness experience." St. John of the Cross called it the "dark night of the soul." These spiritual giants tell us that when we go through this period of depression and despair, when we feel helpless and hopeless, we feel disconnected from ourselves, from other people, from life, and even from God. We may feel that God doesn't care. We may feel abandoned by God. We may doubt God's reality and lose a comforting, strengthening sense of God's presence. This has been the experience of many during the pandemic.

The writer of the 139th Psalm assures us that we are never cut off from God! This makes it one of my favorite psalms. I call it the "no separation" or "no gap" psalm. The psalmist, reflecting on his dark night of the soul, his own wilderness experience, and the wilderness experience of his people, comes to a profound realization: even when he feels separated from God, he is not separated from God. He says to God,

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

The psalmist, from his own personal experience, tells us he has come to realize that there is no place where God is not. Even when we feel we are in hell, God is there! When we are in the depths of despair we may feel alone, but we are not alone.

The understanding of God that is presented in this psalm is, of course, not the only way to understand God. This was the understanding of this psalmist, an understanding based on his own personal experience, his own personal struggle. Many people in his religious tradition must have resonated with his experience of God, however, for they chose to include his reflection in the canon, in the collection of writings we call scripture.

Other biblical writers articulate different experiences of God during wilderness experiences or dark nights of the soul. Some believe that when we depart from God's ways, God turns his back on us. When we break our covenant with God, God breaks his covenant with us. When we choose not to be his people, he chooses not to be our God. These psalms, and there are many of them, speak of not only *feeling* separated from God, but of *being* separated from God. I find that most of the psalms are articulations of this theology, of what the Jewish theologian Martin Buber called "the eclipse of God."

Some theologians within our own church tradition believe we human beings are separate from God and separated from God. The neo-Reformation theologian Karl Barth has said that we are separated from God "by the infinite qualitative difference." Theologians like Barth believe that we need something to bridge the gap between God and us--whether it is the Law, the prophets, Jesus, the Bible, or the church. Without these connecting elements, we remain cut off from God. The Roman Catholic Church, in its insistence that the church is the one and only mediator between God and us, has traditionally accepted "extra Ecclesiam nulla salus" as doctrine, the belief that there is "no salvation outside the church."

There are many ways to understand God because throughout history people have had different experiences of God. Think about the experience of God that is articulated by the writer of the 139th Psalm. What if this psalmist is correct? What if there is no separation between God and us? What if God is not a thing in space and time, a thing that can be in some places but not other places? What if there is no physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual "place" we can go, not even in the depths of our despair where God is not? How would this shape our understanding and practice of prayer?

We separate the moments of our life into happy times and sad, times of triumph and times of tragedy, times when we walk in the light and times when we stumble around in the darkness. We may believe God is in the light but not in the darkness. But listen:

*If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night."
even the darkness is not dark to you:
the night is as bright as the day,*

for darkness is as light to you.

We may think that when we walk in the light we walk with God, and when we walk in darkness we walk alone. According to the psalmist, this is not true! Even when we walk in the darkness, we walk with God! The darkness of our lives is not dark to God, for darkness is as light to God.

Jesus tells us that God knows us. God knows us better than we know ourselves. In our prayers, we don't have to tell God what we need. We don't need to tell God what our brothers and sisters need. We don't need to bring information to God through our prayers, for God is not separate from us and from those whom we love.

When we pray, we open ourselves to God so God can bring information to us, specifically, information about us. When we pray, we ask God to change our hearts and our minds. When we pray, we connect very deeply with God and with those for whom we pray.

This morning I would like us to think of prayer not as establishing a connection with a God who is separate from us, but as realizing and celebrating the deep connection that is already there. I would like us to think of prayer as realizing our deep connection with God and our deep connection with each other. This realization can bring us a profound feeling of joy! When we experience this connection, we open ourselves to God's healing presence in our lives.

A husband and wife who were members of the prayer chain of a previous church I served told me the story of their daughter who was diagnosed with cancer. The couple was convinced that because of what the writer of the Book of James calls "the prayers of the faithful," the prayers of people who cared, people who were members of the prayer chains of their church and their daughter's church, their daughter was totally healed.

How can we understand God's role in the healing process? Many people picture God as separate from us, a God who is in the shape of a human being hovering around the earth like a satellite. In the context of this understanding of God, this concept of God, we could think of prayer as sending a message up to the satellite, of God receiving the message, and then deciding whether to grant the request or not. I call this the satellite model of prayer. In response to this family's prayer, God would make a decision, based on some unknown criteria, whether to cure the couple's daughter, the woman in the next bed, both of them, or neither of them. Presumably, according to this schema, there is a reason why God makes the choices God does, but, since "God's ways are not our ways," and since "God works in mysterious ways," we will never know what factors were taken into consideration in the healing.

However, this satellite model is not the only way we can picture God. We can picture the Spirit of God as a great field of creative, loving, and healing energy in which we are all embedded. When we pray, we enter deeply into that field; we open ourselves to that field. When we engage in intercessory prayer, we are strengthening our connection with the person for whom we pray. We add the energy of our prayer for healing to God's own healing process

within the person. As I have said, at times this makes a significant, a noticeable difference. At other times, it doesn't. I think this understanding of God is at least closer to a verb than a noun.

Going back to my example of the couple from a previous church, they told me that at the time their daughter was diagnosed with cancer, though they were religious people, they did not fully believe in the power of prayer. Then they heard a story that changed their minds. This is the story that they heard (or read).

A woman whose college-aged daughter was dying of cancer placed the young woman's name on a national prayer chain. Against all odds, her daughter was healed.

When the daughter received the news of her recovery from her physician, she went straight to the phone to call her mother. However, she either dialed or was somehow connected to the wrong number. Of all the numbers she could have erroneously dialed (and there are many!), the daughter was somehow connected with the telephone number of the national prayer chain whose members, at that very moment, were praying for her. When she gave the person who answered the phone her name, the woman recognized it immediately and told her they had just been praying for her. The woman at the national prayer chain phone bank was able to tell the young woman her mother's name and the type of cancer she had, so it was clear that they were, indeed, praying for her.

OK, what are the odds of that happening, the odds of the young woman dialing a wrong number and the number she incorrectly dialed should be the number of the national prayer chain who were, at that very moment, praying for her healing? The odds are at least a billion, maybe a trillion, maybe a quadrillion to one! How can you explain this phenomenon unless you assume we are all deeply and meaningfully connected with each other?

You see, we are deeply connected with God, and we are deeply connected with each other. We are deeply connected with God because God, to quote the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, is "the Ground of our being." We are incarnations of God's creative Spirit! We are also connected with each other in a very deep way, much deeper than we know, for we are all children of God and, hence, brothers and sisters.

The apostle Paul, like the psalmist, tells us that we are never separated from God. He says,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The parable of the Prodigal Son tells us that even if we choose to depart from the Father's presence, we can't! God loves us with a love that cannot be broken! When we realize this love,

when we experience it, and when we embrace it through worship and prayer, we empower it to transform us!

We are never separated from God, and we are never separated from each other. Prayer is an experience and a celebration of this deep spiritual connection. Prayer empowers the healing energies of this connection. When we pray, we enter the presence of the person for whom we pray, helping to empower the healing Spirit of God that is already present and working in that person's life.

Our prayer doesn't always result in healing, not because God chooses not to heal that person but because that's life! God always wills and works for healing both in us and in the world. Sometimes people are healed and sometimes they are not, just as some people live and some people die. But never doubt for a moment that our prayers make a difference, our prayers for those on our prayer chain and, also, our prayers for healing within ourselves!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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