

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF PRAYER-IV
The Fourth Sunday in Lent

(03/27/2022)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 8:5-13

“And to the centurion Jesus said, ‘Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.’ And the servant was healed in that hour.” (Matthew 8:13)

Today is the fourth 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.

Before I begin, I would like to go back just one last time to my contention that for God, nothing is impossible--except for things that are impossible. I promise—this will be the very last time! Last week I gave you a silly example of God’s limitations, the example of the stone wall. Let me push that example one step further.

We Christians traditionally describe God not only as omnipotent, which means all powerful, but also as omniscient, which means all knowing. Please note that we have no empirical evidence of this. As one of my theology school professors told us, God is this way “by definition.” From my background in philosophy, I didn’t think this was a strong argument! I guess I am like Thomas—I want to see, hear, experience the risen Christ for myself!

Bear with me. If God is omniscient, then God knows everything. If God knows everything, then God knows the future. If God knows the future, then the future already exists—at least in the mind of God. This means that everything that happens, everything we do is preordained. We may think that when we take an action, we are doing so freely and, therefore, that we are responsible for the action, but, according to this theology, both the action and the outcome have already been decided.

Pushed to its extreme, this is the doctrine of predestination. John Calvin and others have maintained that it is even preordained whether we are saved or damned, whether we will go to heaven or go to hell. Does this trouble you? It does me! This way of thinking about God also implies that Jesus did not “decide” to go to Jerusalem and lay down his life for his friends, to lay down his life for us; it was preordained that he should do so. Jesus and the disciples, whether

they knew it or not, were acting out a script. Suddenly, Jesus' relationship with God and our relationship with God are being called into question.

As you might guess, I am not a big fan of this theory. I believe in free will (though, as a psychologist, I am aware that the experiences of our childhood shape us so deeply that we are not quite as free as we think we are). I obviously can't prove it, but I believe we have more freedom than we think, and that we are consequently responsible for our thoughts, our feelings, our decisions, and our actions. Whether we dwell in heaven or hell in this life and the next is pretty much up to us.

Life is confusing. We don't know why things happen the way they do; we don't know why bad things happen to those whom we love. We don't know why there are wars, why children die of malnutrition. (Although, if we thought about it, we could probably make a pretty good guess of the causes of at least these two problems!) We may be tempted to assuage our existential anxiety by saying and perhaps even believing that everything happens according to God's will. We say with smug confidence, "There are no accidents in life." This belief gives a structure to life, to be sure, but it does so at a heavy price.

This topic brings to mind a conversation I once had with a salesman at a Harley Davidson dealership. Several years ago, when Darlene and I were visiting our family in South Carolina, Darlene and I took Zach and Charlie to a nearby Harley dealership. I told them that the bikes were something that *they* wanted to see; that wasn't entirely true. After watching the movie *Easy Rider*, I have always pictured myself like Peter Fonda on a Harley with monkey bars, the wind blowing through my hair. Of course, in my fantasy, I wasn't wearing a helmet; my motto, like the State of New Hampshire, was "Live Free or Die." Having observed cyclists in New Hampshire and the low rate of coronavirus vaccination in that state, I believe their state motto should be changed to "Live Free and Die." But that's not the point.

By the way, this is a true story. Not all my stories are factually true, but this one is. In the salesroom, I sat in the saddle of a Harley Street Glide 800 just to get a feel for it. A salesman who came up to me remarked that I really looked good on it. He lied. That was when I began to distrust salesmen. I suspect that he said this in an attempt to encourage me to purchase a Harley. (I am serious!) My suspicions were borne out when he told me I should buy it.

I said I would love to, but I have a deep attachment to my brain cells and my life. Everyone I know who owns a motorcycle has had an accident; some have walked away with just a couple of pins in their legs; some have not walked away. When I did my clinical training at Tewksbury State Hospital, before our state passed a law requiring people to wear helmets, there

was an entire ward of young men who had suffered serious brain damage from motorcycle accidents. Their mothers were there every day to feed them breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The salesman assured me that our days are numbered by God; when our time is up, our time is up, and it doesn't matter what we are driving at the time. "So," I responded, "I wouldn't be more apt to prolong my life if I'm driving a Hummer than a Harley." He said "Definitely not! When it is time for God to take you, God takes you." I responded, "So when the planes hit the twin towers, it just happened to be "the time" for all the people who died there." He said "Yes, God sent the planes to hit the towers that day, and for the person whose car didn't start that morning and who, consequently, didn't make it to work, it was just not his time."

I would have liked to continue the discussion to see how far he would go with his belief that there are no accidents, but Darlene took me by my arm and pulled me away. I was ready to go after the Holocaust, to see what he thought about the six million Jews that were murdered, but Darlene was even more afraid I was going to say that, according to his belief system, God must have preordained that we northerners would kick their butt in the Civil War. And Darlene was correct; this is not a smart thing to say in a little town in South Carolina, especially when there are some very big cyclists hanging around with the Confederate flag tattooed on their forehead! (OK, the tattoo on the forehead is a slight exaggeration.) It is true, however, that they have a long memory about things like the Civil War, which they still call "the War of Northern Aggression." But again, that's not the point.

I not only don't *care* if God can't see the future; I *don't want* God to be able to see the future! I don't want God to preordain *any part* of the future! I feel strongly about this! I believe that a micromanaged, preordained personal and collective history would take away that which I believe gives meaning to our life. I want to work together with God and Jesus to create myself; *I want to be a co-creator with God of my life*. I also want to be a co-creator with God of this beautiful world that God has given us—at least my little corner of the world. I want us as a church to be co-creators with God of each other, of our society, and the world. I want us to take on the responsibility of healing the wounds that we bear, and the wounds that we inflict on each other. I want us as individuals and as a church to create a future that is more caring, more compassionate, more just, and more loving, not by ourselves, but with the help of that God who is both within us and among us.

If you take this away from me; if you take this away from us, I believe life loses its meaning. By the way, you probably now realize why I left out parts of the 139th psalm last week. I left out the part where the psalmist says,

*In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,*

when none of them existed.

Maybe the psalmist believed this. Maybe he believed that the misfortunes that befell his people were all the will of God. Maybe the Harley Davidson salesman believes this. I don't.

Let's get back to prayer. The gospels contain descriptions of Jesus healing someone by being with them, talking with them, touching them, or by allowing them to touch him. This morning we read a description of healing at a distance. I would like us to think about this passage because I believe it can help us understand the healing power of prayer.

Some time ago, Dr. Randolph C. Byrd conducted a study on the therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer in the Coronary Care Unit of the San Francisco General Medical Center. Dr. Bird asked,

Who has not, during a time of illness or pain, cried out to a higher being for help and healing? Praying for help and healing is a fundamental concept in practically all societies, though the object to which these prayers are directed varies among the religions of the world. In western culture, the idea of praying for the benefit of others (intercessory prayer) to the Judeo-Christian God is widely accepted and practiced. However, the medical literature contains no scientific evidence either confirming or negating the healing effectiveness of intercessory prayer. In only a few studies have scientific methods been used to attempt to determine whether prayer is therapeutically effective, and these studies have been inconclusive.

My study concerning prayer and patients in a general hospital coronary care unit was designed to answer two questions: (1) does intercessory prayer to the Judeo-Christian God have any effect on the patient's medical condition and recovery while in the hospital, and (2) how are these effects characterized, if present?

Dr. Byrd set up what is called a double-blind experiment. All the patients who were admitted to the coronary care unit at the San Francisco General Hospital that year were given the opportunity to participate in the study. Fifty-seven patients refused to participate for personal reasons or religious convictions. One wonders what kind of "religious convictions" would lead people to not want people to pray for their health and well-being? Anyway, 393 patients agreed to take part in the study.

In a prospective double-blind randomized protocol, the patients are randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. Because the study is following a double-blind protocol, neither the patients nor the researchers know to which group the patients have been assigned.

The double-blind protocol eliminates what is called the placebo effect. If you knew that hundreds of people were praying for you every day, were holding you in their prayers and asking God to heal you, you might feel very good inside. You might feel very cared for. It is well known that this can not only calm the patient's anxieties; it can have a healing effect on his/her body, immune system, and speed of recovery.

The researchers didn't want the placebo effect to influence their data; they wanted to determine whether intercessory prayer had a healing effect on people who had no idea whether they were being held in people's prayers. They also didn't want the hospital staff or the researchers to know which patients were in the experimental group, because this might affect the way they related to these patients. The only factor separating the two groups would be the effect of intercessory prayer on the 200 patients in the experimental group.

The researchers chose the people who were going to pray for the patients in the experimental group based on three criteria: (1) they described themselves as "born again" Christians; (2) they had an active Christian life as manifested by daily devotional prayer; and (3) they were active members of a Christian church. There was no attempt to match the religious orientation of the patient to the persons who were assigned to pray for that patient.

The patient's first name, diagnosis, and general condition were given to the people who were assigned to pray for that patient. Intercessory prayer was offered every day from the time of admission to when the patient was discharged. The intercessors were asked to pray for their patient's rapid recovery, for prevention of complications and death, and to offer any other prayers that they believed might be helpful to their patient.

In the follow-up examinations, it was discovered that the patients in the experimental group, the patients who received the benefit of prayer, had less congestive heart failure, required less diuretic and antibiotic therapy, had fewer episodes of pneumonia, had fewer cardiac arrests, and were less frequently ventilated than the patients in the control group. In an article published in the *Southern Medical Journal*, Dr. Byrd concluded "These data suggest that intercessory prayer to the Judeo-Christian God has a beneficial therapeutic effect in patients admitted to a Coronary Care Unit."

Dr. Byrd's study provides scientific evidence of the healing power of intercessory prayer. But how does intercessory prayer work? Most of us can understand that when we pray for ourselves, when we pray to God for strength, for guidance, and for healing, we open ourselves to God's presence and, in so doing, activate an inner healing power through our faith. Most of us can understand that when we pray, we are plugging ourselves into an energy source (to use a non-personal metaphor) or we are strengthening our relationship with God (to use a personal or

interpersonal metaphor). But how does prayer work when we pray for someone we don't even know--at a distance?

Let me tell you the story of the "Hundredth Monkey." I know I've told this story before, but two of you asked if I would please include it in our Lenten prayer series. So here it is.

According to the theoretical biologist Rupert Sheldrake of the University of London, a group of biologists were trying to study a particular species of monkeys on a group of small South Sea Islands. The islands were not connected with each other, and the monkeys did not travel from one island to another.

The researchers devised an ingenious way of getting the monkeys to come out into the open so they could update the census. They would pull up to the island and leave a line of potatoes along the beach. When the monkeys came out of the jungle to get the potatoes, the researchers could photograph and count them.

One of the monkeys, a female monkey named Lucy, came up with a good idea. Before she ate her potato, Lucy took it down to the ocean to wash it off. This removed the sand from the potato; it also gave the potato a salty taste. Before long, other monkeys on that island began to wash their potatoes in the ocean. This wasn't surprising since monkeys are known to learn by mimicking others.

What did surprise the researchers was what happened on the other islands. When the number of monkeys on island #1 who washed their potatoes reached a certain number, the monkeys on the other islands suddenly began washing their potatoes. On these other islands, however, the procedure didn't begin with one creative monkey who began the activity followed by other monkeys who imitated him or her. The monkeys on the other islands suddenly began to wash their potatoes as a group. The question is: how did the information from the monkeys on island #1 get to the monkeys on the other islands, since the islands are not connected, and the monkeys do not swim from one island to another?

In response to this question, Sheldrake proposed the concept of "the hundredth monkey." Sheldrake suggests that when the number of monkeys who know something reaches a critical number, the information is disseminated through an informational energy field to other monkeys of that species in different places. It is as if all the monkeys of a given species are interconnected on some deep level and, therefore, what happens to one happens to them all.

What does this have to do with the phenomenon of intercessory prayer? Just think. One monkey engaging in a certain activity might not make much of a difference. Ten or twenty

monkeys engaging in a certain activity might not make much of a difference. But when a certain number of monkeys engage in a certain activity, it makes a difference. It activates a force field or energy field that has an observable impact on other monkeys of that species.

Sheldrake believes the phenomenon is species specific. We don't know what the magic number is, but when it is reached, that last monkey, whom he calls the "hundredth monkey," makes all the difference in the world!

When I pray for someone on our prayer list, I believe that my prayer makes a difference. Maybe not a big difference, but a difference. If five or ten people pray for someone, doesn't it make sense that it would make more of a difference? The people who prayed for the patients in Dr. Byrd's coronary care study made an observable difference. If we have twenty or thirty people involved in a church prayer chain, doesn't it make sense that this would have more of an impact than one?

This is an illustration of what has been called "the power of one." When we pray for someone, we might be just one person short of the critical number we need to make a difference. We might be just one person short of creating a strong enough energy field to facilitate healing within the person. How do you know that you are not the person who, if you joined a prayer chain, would make the difference? Your prayer might be just the prayer that is needed, not because you are a spiritual giant, but because your prayer added to the combined prayers of the faithful will make a stronger prayer.

I believe Jesus was able to heal at a distance by himself because Jesus prayed much more deeply than we do. Compared to Jesus' prayers, my prayers are quite superficial! It is recorded that when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, it was as if drops of blood flowed from his head! Jesus' prayer was so powerful that all he had to do was say the word and the person was healed--at a distance.

I believe that Jesus healed through *presence*. This sometimes happened through *physical* presence. At other times Jesus was *spiritually* present to people through prayer. When we visit someone who is hurting, when we spend time with them, we bring a healing energy through our presence. When we pray for someone at a distance, I also believe we are present, and we strengthen a healing energy within that person.

When we pray, we believe that our prayers, our prayerful presence makes a difference. It may not make much of a difference, but we must do what we can. Maybe, just maybe, if we add our prayer to the prayers of other people in this church, we will reach that critical number that is implied in the story of the hundredth monkey. Maybe, like the people who participated in the

coronary care study, our little prayer combined with the prayers of others, the prayers of the faithful, can make a difference. Perhaps our prayers can even help to end the terrible assault on the Ukrainian people.

In our scripture lesson, it seems obvious that the centurion's faith made a difference in the healing of his servant. Our faith in the power of intercessory prayer is an important part of the healing process both for ourselves and for others. Through faith, we open ourselves to God through Christ. Through prayer we enter more deeply into our relationship with God. When we pray, we enter the kingdom of God that Jesus came to help us experience: that field of healing, light-giving energy that we call the Holy Spirit, the presence of God that is within us, the field of energy that connects us all on a deep and meaningful level.

I invite you to pray every day for yourself, for members of your family, and for people whom you know to be in special need. I invite you to pray for the people in the Ukraine, the people in Haiti, the people in Lebanon and Ethiopia, the women and girls in Afghanistan. Although Jesus could heal at a distance through the power of his deep grounding in God, it takes a few more of us to make a difference. Remember--it only took a few intercessors to make an observable difference in Dr. Byrd's coronary care study.

Every time you pray, just before you begin your prayer, stop, and think. You just might be the "hundredth monkey!"

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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