

THE POWER OF INTERCESSORY PRAYER

(01/15/2023)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 8:1-17

The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word and my servant will be healed." (Mt. 8:8)

My sermon last week, as you may have guessed, was well received. I confess I was surprised that the incident with Damar Hamlin touched me so deeply. I guess I must be more troubled by the tribalism that splits us off from our brothers and sisters than I thought. I must be more troubled by the polarization of political parties and viewpoints in our country and around the world than I thought. I found myself touched that, for a brief period, we all seemed to come together in an outpouring of care and compassion.

Last week several people asked me to say a little more about my suggestion that, in addition to the interventions of the medical personnel on the scene and at Cincinnati University Hospital, there may have been another factor that facilitated this young man's remarkable recovery. I was, of course, suggesting that the prayers of those on the field, in the stadium, and everyone watching the game on television might have made a difference.

So, this morning, I would like to say a little more about the efficacy of intercessory prayer. Mind you, I am not saying that my understanding is the right way to view intercessory prayer. I am not saying that if you hold another view, another understanding, you are wrong. All I am saying is that if something doesn't make sense to me, e.g., some spiritual discipline, I find that I am unable to do it and certainly not commit to it. My way of understanding intercessory prayer makes sense to me and helps me to pray.

This past fall, just before two of our church members participated in the annual Dana-Farber Jimmy Fund Walk, a solicitation for support appeared in the Boston Globe. It said, "Be the one. You could raise the dollar that helps end cancer for good." This, of course, made me think of Dr. Byrd's study of the efficacy of intercessory prayer and the concept of the hundredth monkey. I know that I have mentioned these before, but they make an important contribution to my understanding of intercessory prayer. So, this morning, along with the familiar account of Jesus' interaction with the Roman centurion, I think you would like to hear them again!

The gospels contain descriptions of Jesus healing someone by talking with them, by touching them, or by allowing them to touch him. This morning we heard a description of healing at a distance. This scriptural account of healing at a distance may help us understand the healing power of our own intercessory prayer as individuals and as a church.

Several decades 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. Byrd shared his motivation for undertaking the study when he said,

Who has not, during a time of illness or pain, cried out to 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. . .

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 450 patients who were admitted to the coronary care unit at the San Francisco General Hospital over a ten-month period were given the opportunity to participate in the study. Fifty-seven refused for personal reasons, religious convictions, and/or unwillingness to sign the informed consent. One wonders why someone would not want to participate in a study on the healing power of intercessory prayer “because of religious convictions.” What kind of “religious convictions” would lead one to adopt an antagonistic attitude toward prayer or toward people who care enough to pray for your health and healing? I don't think I would be inclined to attend that church.

In a prospective double-blind randomized protocol, the patients are randomly assigned to one of two groups: a control group and an experimental group. Neither the patients nor the researchers know to which group the patients have been assigned.

This double-blind protocol is important because it eliminates what is called the placebo effect. If you knew that people were holding you in their prayers every day and asking God to heal you, you might feel very good inside. It is well known that this can diminish your anxiety, strengthen your immune system, and increase the speed of recovery. We see this in the responses we receive from people whom we have placed on our prayer list; they are deeply touched that we have placed their name on our list and that our parishioners care enough for someone they may never have met and probably will never meet to hold them in our prayers. Do I think that this experience of being held, of being lovingly held in prayer by a community of faith can make a difference in a person's healing? Absolutely!

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 to know which patients were in the experimental group because this might affect the way they related to these patients. The researchers wanted the only factor differentiating the two groups to be the healing power of intercessory prayer for the 190 patients in the experimental group.

Dr. Byrd chose the people who were going to pray for the patients based on three criteria: (1) they described themselves as "born again" Christians; (2) they had an active Christian life as evidenced 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 that of the persons who were assigned to pray for that patient.

The patient's first name, diagnosis, and general condition were given to the intercessors that were assigned to pray for that patient. The intercessory prayer was offered every day from the patient's time of admission until he/she was discharged. Each intercessor was asked to pray daily for his/her 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 by the patients' physicians, 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 intubated and ventilated than the patients in the control group, the patients who did not receive the benefit of prayer. Dr. Byrd concludes his article by stating: "These data suggest that intercessory prayer to the Judeo-Christian God has a beneficial therapeutic effect in patients admitted to a Coronary Care Unit."

Here is scientific evidence of the healing power of intercessory prayer! I understand that some people are not particularly interested in this study because they already believe in the power of prayer. It is my hope that scientific studies like this will speak to the many devout Christians who do not pray regularly, who only pray during Sunday worship.

I have a hunch that many of us don't include prayer as part of our daily devotions because we don't know how prayer works, and we aren't sure we believe in the power of prayer. After all, if you don't believe prayer works, why would you pray? I find these studies helpful not for those who already believe in prayer and who pray, but for those of us who need to understand it before we include it in our spiritual disciplines.

It makes sense to ask God for strength, for guidance, and for healing. When we pray to God for healing, we activate the healing power within us through the prayerful attitude we bring toward our life situation. When we pray, we plug ourselves back into a wonderful energy source, to use a non-personal metaphor, or we strengthen our relationship with God, to use a more personal metaphor. But how does prayer work when we pray for someone we don't even know? Here we come to the concept of the hundredth monkey.

According to the biologist Rupert Sheldrake of the University of London, a group of researchers were studying a particular species of monkeys on a group of small South Sea Islands. The islands were separate from each other, and the monkeys did not travel from one island to another. The researchers were trying to conduct a monkey census. However, if you have ever tried to count monkeys in a jungle setting, even on a small island, you can appreciate the researchers' difficulty. It is much easier for me to count the number of people in attendance at our Sunday morning worship. You all sit in the same place every week.

The researchers devised an ingenious way of getting the monkeys to come into the open so they could be photographed and counted. The researchers would pull up to the shore and leave a line of potatoes on the beach. When the monkeys spotted the potatoes, they came out of the jungle to get them. Eventually, every time the boat pulled up the monkeys came out in anticipation of their special treat. Then the researchers could count them.

One of the monkeys on one of the islands, a female monkey named Lucy, suddenly began to engage in a creative activity. Before she ate the potato, Lucy took it down to the ocean to wash it off. This removed the sand from the potato, and it gave it a little salt taste. Before long, more and more of the monkeys on that island began to copy Lucy's behavior. This wasn't surprising to the researchers because monkeys are known to learn by mimicking other monkeys. Monkey see; monkey do.

What did surprise the researchers was what happened on the other islands. When the number of monkeys on island #1 who were washing their potatoes reached a certain number, the monkeys on the other islands suddenly began washing their potatoes. On these other islands, the procedure was different from that on island #1. It didn't begin with one creative monkey whose behavior was copied. The monkeys on these other islands began washing their potatoes as a group. Now how did the information from island #1 get to the other islands since the monkeys did not travel between the islands?

The concept of the hundredth monkey suggests that when the number of monkeys who know something reaches a critical mass or number, the information is disseminated through some kind of informational energy field, like a quantum field (to use the language of quantum

mechanics), to other monkeys in different places. It is as if all the monkeys of a given species are connected, and what happens to one happens to them all. This reminds us that what we learn and how we live our life makes an impact on all human beings, on life, for at a very deep level we are all connected; we are all connected in God.

What does this have to do with the power of intercessory prayer? Just think! One monkey engaging in a certain activity might not make much of a difference. Ten or twenty 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, for Sheldrake believes the phenomenon is species specific. For example, what a monkey learns is not passed on to an elephant. The number one hundred is, of course, symbolic. We don't know what the magic number is, but no matter what it is, that last monkey, the "hundredth monkey," makes all the difference.

The Jimmy Fund solicitation encouraged us to consider the possibility that the dollar we give might be the one that tips the scale. That single dollar can make a big difference.

When we pray for someone on our prayer list, we believe our prayer makes a difference. Maybe not a big difference, but a difference. If we have five or ten people praying for someone, doesn't it make sense that it would make more of a difference? The coronary care study used between three and seven people to pray for each patient, and that made an observable, a measurable difference. What if we have twenty or thirty people in our church who are praying for someone--doesn't it make sense that this would make more of an impact?

Why does it take so many of us to make a difference when Jesus healed at a distance all by himself? This is because Jesus prayed much more deeply than we do! Not to criticize our prayers, but compared to Jesus' prayers, ours, or at least mine, are relatively superficial. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed, drops of blood flowed from his head! His prayer was a lot deeper, a lot more powerful than my prayer! Jesus' prayer for healing was so powerful that all he had to do was say the word and the person was healed--at a distance. This is because Jesus lived so close to God, so much closer to God than we do, or at least than I do.

I believe that Jesus healed people at a distance through prayer. But here I am, faced with my own needs, the needs of people within my family, the needs of the people on our prayer list, and the needs of people around the world. I am not Jesus. I am not even close to Jesus! But I need to do what I can. I offer my prayer because I believe it makes a difference. Maybe, just maybe, if I add my 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, my little prayer combined with the prayers of others, the

prayers of the faithful, can make a difference. And maybe, just maybe, we all contributed in some way to Damar Hamlin's recovery.

Think about faith, which I understand as the quality of our relationship with God. The faith of the Roman centurion, his faith in Jesus, obviously made a difference in the healing of his servant. Our faith in Jesus and in the healing power of prayer are important parts of the healing process both for ourselves and for others. Through faith, we open our hearts to God through Christ. Through prayer we enter more deeply into our relationship with God. In prayer, we enter that eternal realm, the kingdom of God that Jesus came to help us find--that field of healing, light-giving energy which we call the Holy Spirit, that presence of God both within and among us which connects us all on a very deep and meaningful level.

I know that some of you, probably many of you hold what I would call the satellite understanding of prayer. We picture God either seated in heaven or circling the world like a satellite. We send our individual and collective prayers up to God; God "hears" them; then God decides whether and how to answer them. In Damar's case, God "decided" or "chose" to heal him. With those for whom we pray are not healed, we assume God chose not to heal them. When we ask why, we are told that "God's ways are not our ways." "God has his reasons; you may learn them after you die." As you may guess, I am not a big fan of this understanding of God and this understanding of prayer.

I also do not believe that the number of people who pray for a certain person makes a difference to God. Can you imagine God sitting on a throne in a satellite saying, if the number of prayers for Damar Hamlin reach five million, I will heal him; if not, I won't. And for that immigrant refugee, that child who is sick and dying, there just aren't enough prayers to prompt me to intervene. This application of the satellite understanding of God combined with a belief that God micromanages the universe is not congruent with my understanding of Jesus, with Jesus' teachings, and with my relationship with Jesus. I have found that often the satellite understanding becomes more of a barrier in our relationship with God than a connection.

In my attempt to understand prayer, I draw from a belief, in an experience of our deep interconnectedness with all sentient beings in and through God. I draw from something that Huston Smith, a professor of world religions at MIT, once said:

*To the monotheist there is one God.
To the polytheist there are many Gods.
To the atheist there is no God.
To the mystic, there is only God.*

I believe this is what the German mystic Meister Eckhart taught, and it is why we will be reading Meister Eckhart when our Tuesday spiritual study and growth group resumes meeting.

Regarding those who are not healed or who die, despite our prayers, I think this is just an example of the deep truth of impermanence, the impermanence of our form and of all forms. We might like to make the things that are important to us permanent, either here or in heaven, but I think we are just trying to make reality fit our personal needs, wishes, desires. Don't take it personally when your prayer doesn't work the way you want it to. That is not the way it works. You may be asking for something that runs counter to the way God is living in this world.

We pray for the persons on our prayer lists, not because we are trying to influence God to miraculously heal the person, but because we know we are already deeply connected with that person, and our prayers can activate or strengthen the healing, strengthening, comforting power, the presence of God within that person. Remember, although Jesus could heal at a distance through the power of his relationship with God, through his being one with God, it takes a few more of us to make a difference.

Remember, it only took three to seven to make an observable difference in the recovery of patients in Dr. Byrd's coronary care study. What would happen if we made prayer the focus of our church community, the focus of our mission? If we did, then each of us would become important because who knows--we just might be the hundredth monkey!

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