

## THE POWER OF PRAYER -- III NO SEPARATION

(03/17/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139; Romans 8:35-39

*“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)*

This morning, the fifth Sunday in Lent, we are continuing our reflections on the power of 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.

Let’s think about how our understanding of prayer makes us aware of our picture or concept of God, and how it can even shape our understanding of God.

When you pray to God, what is the image of God that you hold in your mind’s eye? Different people have different pictures of God. Some picture God as an elderly white man with a beard sitting on a throne up in the clouds. Some pray or talk to Jesus, whom they can picture in human form. Some pray to God as the Holy Spirit, as a field of energy that flows up inside them. Some pray to Mary with whom they feel more comfortable, more accepted, more understood. Some don’t actually picture anything; rather they sense a presence.

It is not surprising that different people have different images of God. If I ask you to look at this book, Joseph Campbell’s *The Power of Myth*, and tell me what you see, what would you say? You would probably say you see a black cover with lots of words and a white bar code near the bottom. If I were to ask you if you see the mandala with a dragon in the middle, what would you say? You can’t see it? I can! It’s 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.

Which of us has the correct picture of the book? Since our descriptions differ, we can’t both be right, can we? Shouldn’t there be just one true picture of the book? In an attempt to resolve our differences, I could try to convince you that my picture is the correct picture, and you are in error. If I had the power, and if I were so inclined, I could torture you until you admitted that you see the book my way. I might even kill you just because your picture of the book differs from mine.

Do any of these options sound like a good idea? No? However, the three great monotheistic religions, the “religions of the book,” have employed different variations of them

repeatedly throughout history! And I agree! They don't sound very good to me! And I don't think they would sound very good to Jesus.

You don't have to be a philosopher, specifically an epistemologist, to understand that there is no single true picture of this book. It all depends on our perspective. No matter where we stand, we can never get a total picture of this book, for there are an infinite number of perspectives. However, 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 one and only true picture just because it is real and meaningful to us.

If we can have different yet equally valid perspectives on something as simple as this book, what makes us think that the totality of God can be captured from a single perspective? Isn't God a lot more complex than this book? Remember, there is an element of mystery inherent in God that is not inherent in this book. This book is a thing that can be localized in space and time. God is a spirit, a presence that cannot be localized. God is not a thing among other things in the universe, a thing or a person which is in one place but not another. This is what the mystics like Meister Eckhart are telling us when they tell us that God is nothing (no thing). They are telling us that some dimensions of reality, such as the spiritual dimension of reality, can be real without existing as we commonly think of things as existing.

We also need to remember that we experience this book through our senses. Our experience of God is different. We experience God through our heart. We sense God's presence (or at least some people sense God's presence). Those who sense God's presence "see" God or "hear" God's voice as an inner experience the same way we "hear" what is said or "see" what is happening in our dreams.

Let's think about what the 139th Psalm and the passage from Romans teach us about 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 even care for us, but because we have withdrawn from life, we cannot feel it. Other people may love us, may express or show their love to us, but because we feel unlovable, we cannot receive it or believe it. There may be a meaning and purpose to our life (and there is!), but when we are depressed, we cannot find it. There may be options for change (there always are!), but when we are in the throes of despair, we can't see them. We may think "there is only one thing to do." We have no hope. We see no path leading to a brighter future; we sense no light at the end of the tunnel.

The great spiritual men and women of our religious tradition, like John of the Cross, have called this experience a “wilderness experience” or the “dark night of the soul.” They say that when we are in the throes of this experience, we feel disconnected from other people, from life, and even from God. We may feel unloved by God. We may feel abandoned by God. We may doubt God’s reality, and consequently lose that comforting sense of God’s presence.

The psalmist, however, assures us that we are never cut off from God! This is why the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm is one of my favorite psalms! I call it the “no separation” psalm. The psalmist, reflecting on his own wilderness experience and the wilderness experience of his people when they are in exile, comes to a profound realization. Even when he *feels* separated from God, he is actually not separated from God! He says to God (rhetorically),

*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 tells us that there is no place where God is not. Even when we are in hell, God is there! When we are in the depths of despair, we may feel alone, but we are never really alone!

The psalmist’s understanding of God as expressed in the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm is not the only way to understand God. As evidenced by what they wrote in the Bible, some of the major figures in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and also some of the theologians throughout the history of the Christian Church had different understandings. They believe that when we break our covenant with God, God breaks the covenant with us. When we choose not to be God’s people, God chooses not to be our God. These psalms speak of not only *feeling* separated from God, but also of *being* separated from God.

By the way, I don’t want you to get the impression that I am thrilled with everything that the psalmist included in the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm, just as I am not thrilled with what I read in many of the psalms and in many of the books of the Bible. If you actually read this psalm or listen to it on the recorded podcast of this sermon, I think you will spot the verses that I find offensive. In my defense, Jesus also finds them offensive.

Some Christian theologians believe that we human beings are separate from God and separated from God. Because of this separation we need something to bridge the gap between God and us, whether it is Jesus, the Bible, an orthodox belief system, the church, or the sacraments. Without these connecting elements we are cut off from God. The Roman Catholic Church, in its insistence on itself as the only mediator, told its followers that there is no salvation outside the church. Only people within the church have contact with God. Only people in communion with the church will be saved.

I understand this way of thinking. It is what Peter Stilla, in his book *Naturally Miraculous*, the book we are currently reading in our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Study & Growth Group, identifies as the way that people in what he calls Group Two think. It describes their theology, their understanding of God and their understanding of our relationship with God. In their defense, it can be a comforting theology, at least if you are a member of what you believe is the “inner circle.”

However, what if the writer of the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm is correct? What if there is no separation between God and us? What if God is not a thing that can be located in space and time, which can be in some places but not other places? What if there is nowhere that we can go, nowhere in the outer world and not even in the depths of our despair where God is not? How would this shape our understanding and practice of prayer? It might lead us to what Peter Stilla calls the outlook of those in what he calls Group One, the outlook of those, like Jesus, who ground their faith in a God whom they experience within. The mystics, not only in our Christian tradition, but in other religious traditions as well, fall into this Group One category.

As you might expect, there is a Buddhist saying that I like. The Buddhists tell us that the solution to the problem of the bridge between us and God is simple—none is needed!

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 to the psalmist:

*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 separate the moments of our lives into light and darkness. We think that when we walk in the light we walk with God, and when we walk in darkness we walk alone. But 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.

If we look at it from this perspective, we could think of prayer not as *establishing* a connection with God, or *reestablishing* a broken connection with God, but as *realizing* the connection that is already there. Then intercessory prayer becomes the realization, the

experience of our deep connection with each other in community. When we pray, as we enter into the presence of the Holy Spirit, we experience this connection. Our intercessory prayer then aligns with God's healing presence within the person for whom we pray.

In a previous church that I served, a couple that became members of our prayer chain told us the story of their daughter who was diagnosed with cancer. The couple was convinced that because of the "prayers of the faithful," the prayers of people who were members of the prayer chains of their church and their daughter's church, the daughter's cancer disappeared.

How did prayer help their daughter? How can we understand God's role in the healing process? Some people picture a God who is separate from us in heaven, and who "hears" our prayers. They believe that God listened to the prayers of the girl's parents and decided to cure their daughter. When we ask why God chose to cure her and not the person in the next bed, we are told that there is no answer to this question because "God's ways are not our ways."

Though I understand this explanation of how prayer works, I believe the 139<sup>th</sup> psalm offers us another option. The psalmist and the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome tell us that we are never separated from God, and we are never separated from each other. We don't have to picture God as hovering around the earth like a satellite. We don't have to picture prayer as sending a message up to God and then God either deciding to grant the request or not, either sending a healing ray of energy down to earth or not--for God's own mysterious reasons.

We could also picture the Spirit of God as a great field of energy, a field of connecting love in which we are all embedded. This could be what we know as the Holy Spirit. Because God is so near to us and knows us so well, we experience this presence as personal. When we pray, as we enter deeply into that field, we are actually connected with the person for whom we pray. When we pray, we are adding our prayer for healing to the person's own healing process, which comes from the God who is present within that person. And at times, our prayer can make a noticeable difference!

Our prayer, even the prayers of many, don't always bring about the results we desire, don't always bring about healing. I don't know why some people are healed and others are not. But never doubt for a moment that our prayers make a difference, our prayers for those on our prayer list and also our prayers for healing within ourselves.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
March 17, 2024*