

## THE POWER OF PRAYER -- IV THE HUNDREDTH MONKEY

(06/02/2024)

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)*

Last week, in my sermon on the theology of the Trinity, I touched on one way of understanding intercessory prayer, prayers that I/we offer to someone in need. Today I would like to say a little more about this understanding and what it teaches about the importance of your prayer.

Last year, just before two of our church members, Dianne Simmons and Jim Holmes, participated in the Jimmy Fund Walk in support of the Dana-Farber Cancer Center, a solicitation for support appeared in the Boston Globe. It said, "Be the one. You could contribute the dollar that helps end breast cancer for good." This, of course, made me think of the hundredth monkey!

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. I hope that these scriptural accounts of healing can help to deepen our understanding of 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 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 or not 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 of the 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." I mean, what kind of religious convictions would one have that would lead one to adopt an antagonistic attitude toward prayer? I'm just curious . . .

In a prospective double-blind randomized protocol, the patients are randomly assigned to one of two groups: a control group and 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. Actually, this is more technically a triple-blind study, since the hospital staff that cared for the patients also did not know to which group an individual patient had been assigned.

The 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 have a healing effect on a person's anxieties, and thus on his/her immune system and speed of recovery. By the way, it is not uncommon for people who have been placed on our prayer list, people whom we hold in our prayers, to tell us that it means so much to them to know that people in our little church are thinking of them, that we care about them, and that we are holding them in our prayers. This feeling of well-being or comfort could be a result of our prayers, or it could be attributable to the placebo effect. I really don't care! All I care about is that the person feels better because we are holding them in our prayers!

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 or not 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 and which the control 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 200 patients in the experimental group.

Dr. Byrd chose the intercessors, 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 done outside of the hospital every day from the time of admission until the patient 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. In his article Dr. Byrd concludes 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. I find studies like these interesting and valuable because of the many people, devout Christian people, who do not pray on their own, who only pray during Sunday (or Saturday) worship.

I have a hunch that many Christians don’t include prayer as part of their daily devotions because they don’t know how prayer works, and they aren’t sure they believe in the power of prayer. After all, if you don’t believe prayer works, why would you pray? I find studies like Dr. Byrd’s helpful not for those who already believe in prayer, but for those who need to understand it before they include it in their spiritual discipline or daily devotions, before they will pray for themselves or for people in special need. In terms of Jungian typology, this sermon is directed toward thinking types—these people always try to understand things! And yes, your pastor definitely falls into this category! I can’t believe something I don’t understand.

Most people can understand how helpful prayer can be when we ask God for strength, for guidance, and for healing. It is just common sense that when we pray to God for healing, we activate the healing power of the Divine within us through the prayerful attitude we bring toward our life situation. When we pray, we are plugging ourselves back into a wonderful energy source, to use a non-personal metaphor, or we are strengthening our relationship with God, to use a more personal or relational metaphor. But how does prayer work when we pray for someone we have never met, someone we don’t even know?

Let me tell you the story of the hundredth monkey. According to the theoretical biologist Rupert Sheldrake of the University of London, a group of researchers were trying to study 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. (I know that most of us here this morning have never tried to do this, so just use your imagination.)

In an attempt to address their problem, the researchers devised an ingenious way of getting the monkeys to come out 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 to get them. Eventually, every time the motorboat pulled up to the shoreline, the monkeys came out in anticipation of their special treat. Then the researchers could count them.

The researchers noted that one of the monkeys on one of the islands, a female monkey they had 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 also gave it a little salt taste. Before long, more and more of the monkeys on that island began to copy Lucy's behavior; they washed off their own potatoes before they ate them. This wasn't particularly surprising to the researchers because monkeys are known to learn by mimicking other monkeys as well as humans.

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! However, on these other islands, the procedure was different from that on island #1. It didn't begin with one creative monkey whose behavior was observed and 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 tells us 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 to other monkeys in different places. It is as if all the monkeys of a given species are connected, are deeply interconnected, and what happens to one of them happens to them all. This reminds us that what we learn and how we live our life makes an impact on *all* human beings, for at a very deep level we are all interconnected, we are deeply interrelated. At bottom, we are all One.

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 monkeys might not make much of a difference. But when a certain number of monkeys engage in a certain activity, it makes a noticeable 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. We don't know if the magic number is one hundred, which is just a symbolic number, but no matter what it actually is, that last monkey, that hundredth monkey, makes all the difference in the world!

The solicitation in the Boston Globe encourages us to consider the possibility that the dollar we give just 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 the patients and that made an observable difference! What if we have twenty or thirty people engaged in intercessory prayer for people who are hurting in some way--doesn't it make sense that this would make more of an impact?

When someone who is a member or friend of our church, who is a part of our church family stands in need of healing, strength, or comfort, the prayer chain in our church might be just one person short of creating a strong enough energy field to make a difference. You never know! Your prayer, *your prayer* might be just the prayer the person needs, not because you are a spiritual giant, but because your prayer will be added to the combined prayers of the rest of us to make a stronger prayer. Please don't take offense, but you just might be the hundredth monkey!

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 pretty superficial! In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus prayed, drops of blood flowed from his forehead. 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 in the healing power of Jesus' prayers. But here I am, a very human Christian, faced with my own needs, the needs of people within my family, the needs of the people on our prayer list, the needs of my clients and parishioners, and the needs of people around the world. I am not Jesus! I am not even close to Jesus! But I have 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, the prayers of the Christian community, will make a difference.

In our scripture lesson this morning, we can see that the faith of the Roman centurion made a difference in the healing of his servant. Our faith in the healing 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. In prayer, we enter into that eternal realm, the realm or Kingdom of God that Jesus came to help us find, that field of healing, light-giving energy that we call the Holy Spirit, that presence of God both within and among us that connects us all on a very deep and meaningful level.

I invite you to pray for the persons on our prayer list and for all those whom you know to be in special need. Remember, although Jesus could heal at a distance through the power of his relationship with God, it takes a few more of us to make a difference! It only took three to seven to make an observable difference in the 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 and every one of us would become important because, who knows--you just might be the hundredth monkey!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson*

*The First Community Church of Southborough*

[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)

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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.