

THE POWER OF PRAYER -- V WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?

(06/09/2024)

Scripture Reading: Acts 3:1-10

“And the lame man fixed his attention on Peter and John, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’” (Acts 3:5-6)

This morning, we are continuing our reflections on the power of prayer. I hope our reflections during this Easter season and beyond have begun to lead us into a deeper understanding of the meaning and power of prayer, have led 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.

When we think about prayer, we almost immediately come upon the matter of expectations. The first is our expectations of life and other people, and how we respond when life or other people don't meet our expectations. The second is our expectations of God, what we expect from God, and how we respond when God doesn't meet our expectations. The third is our expectations of prayer, what we expect to happen in prayer or through prayer, and how we respond when the results or consequences of our prayer don't meet our expectations or desires.

Let's begin with this morning's scripture lesson from the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts begins with Jesus' ascension into heaven. Following the ascension, Jesus is no longer present to the apostles in human form. However, the apostles discover him in a new form on the day of Pentecost when they receive the Holy Spirit. From that point on they begin to preach and teach the gospel, to carry out Christ's work in the world, and to build up the church, the mystical body of Christ.

As we heard this morning, Peter and John are going up to the temple at the hour of prayer. Note that Peter and John still see themselves as observant Jews. Several years ago, during our Sunday morning Bible study of Paul's letter to the Romans, we learned that Peter initially regarded the newly emerging religion that we call Christianity as a kind of reformed Judaism. This is why Peter believed that converts from other ethnic or religious backgrounds had to become observant Jews, e.g., had to be circumcised, before they could become Christians.

Paul, who felt he was called to bring the Christian gospel to the Gentiles, to the non-Jews, disagreed with Peter. Paul was the first apostle to realize that Christianity is not a branch of Judaism, a kind of reformed Judaism, but is a religion or a spiritual path all on its own. The followers of this path describe themselves not as “sons of David,” but as “disciples of the Way.”

As Peter and John approach the temple at the hour of prayer, a crippled beggar, a man lame from birth, takes up his begging station in front of the main gate. The man asks Peter and

John for alms, for money. Peter responds, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.” And the man stands up and walks!

The man who is begging has certain expectations that he brings to his encounter with Peter and John. He knows what he wants. He wants money, something to make his difficult life a little easier. Notice that he does not receive what he expects, what he wants. He receives something quite different and infinitely more valuable—not just the miraculous healing but also the beginning of a relationship with the source of his healing--Jesus Christ of Nazareth!

We all have expectations, and we have them in every area of our life. We have certain conscious and unconscious expectations of ourself, expectations that become demands, expectations that become problematic when they are perfectionistic or unrealistic in any way. They are an important part of every relationship. They are an important part of marriage--giving rise to a good deal of marital conflict when our partner does not meet our expectations in some significant way. They are an important part of parenting--giving rise to parent-child conflict when a child's search for authenticity, his/her identity exploration, leads the child or adolescent to deviate from parental dictates. They are an important part of friendships, framing our expectations of ourself, of what we feel we should offer or give to our friends, and, concomitantly, what they should offer or give to us. They are an important part of our relationship with our church; for many people, when their church does not match their expectations, they become angry and leave. And, as we might note from the dialogues or monologues between the psalmist and Yahweh in the Psalms, they are an important part of our relationship with God.

At the risk of oversimplifying, when other people do not live up to our expectations, we tend to feel angry. When we do not live up to our own expectations, we tend to feel guilty.

Becoming conscious of our expectations is an important part of growth in the areas we mentioned. When we feel anger toward someone, instead of just letting this feeling dictate our words and actions, we should try to understand our expectations and the feelings that attend them. We should determine whether our expectations are conscious or unconscious, whether they are realistic or unrealistic, whether they are healthy or unhealthy. We also need to realize how our expectations, which often morph into demands, can keep us from accepting the other as he/she is, from loving the person as he/she is as a child of God.

Now what does the matter of expectations have to do with our relationship with God? I first encountered this question approximately fifty-five years ago when I was in my first parish. A woman who had lost her husband shortly after he retired was not only sad and grieving because of her loss; she was also angry at God for allowing her husband to die.

The woman had certain expectations of God. I'm not sure she was conscious of them *before* the loss of her husband, but these expectations became clear following his death. The

woman reasoned that if God is in total control of everything that happens in life, as she believed God is, then God must have wanted her husband to die. By this line of reasoning, her husband's death must have been God's will. This led to feelings of anger toward God which, unexpressed, naturally turned into depression.

In our conversation, it became clear that, in keeping with the woman's beliefs and expectations, she felt that even if God did not directly, intentionally will or cause her husband's death, God did have the power to prevent it. This led her to the conclusion that God had chosen not to intervene, that God had allowed her husband's death to happen. The result was the same: feelings of anger toward God, anger that, turned inward, manifested as depression.

Unfortunately, at least from my standpoint, the woman, out of her feelings of resentment toward God stopped going to church, stopped praying, and declared that if this was the kind of God that Christians worshipped, she wanted nothing to do with that God. Though her response was perfectly understandable in terms of her theology, it left her alone, without the spiritual resources she needed to guide her through this very difficult period in her life and into the new life to which I believed God called her.

Let me give you an example of what I consider a healthier response to disappointed expectations. Some of you probably remember Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of John Edwards, the Democratic senator from North Carolina. At the time of an interview that I happened to catch on television, Elizabeth's breast cancer, which had been in remission, had returned.

I don't remember who conducted the interview, but the interviewer asked Elizabeth Edwards to talk about her religious faith and the role it played in helping her deal both with her breast cancer and with the tragic loss of their teenage son in an automobile accident.

Elizabeth said that through these tragedies she came to realize that, without knowing it, she had held certain expectations of God. She thought or believed that if she were a good daughter, a good sister, a good wife, a good mother, a born-again Christian who attended worship, was active in her church, and gave generously to charity, God would protect her and her loved ones. And by all accounts from those who knew her, Elizabeth more than held up her part of the bargain!

Then something very unexpected happened! Their son died in an automobile accident. Elizabeth had her expectations of God, expectations that had not been totally conscious to that point. She also had a life experience that did not fit these expectations. God, for whatever reason, had chosen not to live up to his part of the bargain. She said she felt betrayed by God, and she was filled with resentment and anger.

Then it suddenly dawned on her! Perhaps the problem wasn't God or life! Perhaps her expectations did not coincide with reality. Perhaps God had never really entered into her implicit

contract. Elizabeth said that this was the point when she realized that God does not protect us. This was never part of the contract! God does not protect us, but God walks with us in both the hills and the valleys of our life journey.

Confronted with a situation that did not meet her expectations, Elizabeth chose to revise her expectations. She actually rediscovered God! I happen to agree with Elizabeth; I do not believe that God protects us. I believe that Elizabeth Edwards' understanding of God deepened. You might not agree. The point is that Elizabeth experienced a deepening of her relationship with God rather than a breaking off of this relationship. And it was this that helped her deal with her cancer when it returned and finally took her life.

The same dynamic or process applies to prayer. In a church I previously served, a young woman, an active member of our church, placed the name of one of her friends, who had cancer, on our prayer list.

Unfortunately, the parishioner's friend died. Just like the first woman I mentioned, the parishioner harbored a deep resentment toward God. She told me that if God had willed her friend's death, she could no longer trust such a cruel God. If God had the power to respond to the supplications of the prayer chain in our church but chose not to, she could no longer believe in such a heartless God or in the efficacy of intercessory prayer. Unlike Elizabeth Edwards, this young woman was unwilling to examine her expectations of both God and prayer. Her point was that prayer either works or it doesn't in getting what she wants. When I suggested that it wasn't that simple, she had no desire to explore the matter further. She left the church and never returned.

What would you say to this woman? Have you ever had a similar situation in your life? Has your faith (or at least your belief system) ever been challenged by some life circumstance that forced you to struggle with the same kind of questions?

I do not have *the* answer to this question. I have my own personal answer, but my answer may not be your answer. What is important is that we ask the question, struggle with it, examine our expectations of God, life, and prayer, and then hopefully rediscover each of them on an even deeper level. I have a sense that this was what the psalmists did when they felt abandoned by God, and that this was what Job did after his life fell apart.

As you might guess, in addition to the teachings of Jesus, there is a book by the Buddhist teacher Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel. Her book is entitled *The Power of an Open Question: The Buddha's Path to Freedom*. The book, should you be interested in reading it, is about Buddhism, but I believe it is entirely congruent with our Christian faith.

With regard to some of the most difficult questions that life poses to us or that we pose to life, if we carry them in the proper way, the questions will shape us more than the answers would. And this is what life is all about: shaping soul!

As the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, perhaps the greatest poet of our century, has said,

I would beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (trans. by Stephen Mitchell)

As we pass through the difficult periods in our life, let us remember how important it is to turn to God in prayer, to be open to God, trying not only to understand but also to accept those times when the life God has given us does not match what we feel we deserve, what we would have set up for ourselves if we were God. Let us remember how important it is that we clarify our understanding of God and our expectations of God lest we push God away when we feel our heartfelt prayers are not answered or are not answered to our liking.

The next time our expectations are disappointed, whether it be our expectations of ourself, other people, our family members, life, God, or prayer, before we throw it all away, we should stop and examine our expectations. Our ability to live with the questions that life poses for us could lead us into a deeper relationship with God and with our loved ones.

Who knows? Like the beggar at the gate of the temple, we may not get what we ask for; we may not get what we want. By the grace of God, miraculously, we may receive much, much more in totally unexpected ways!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.