

EPIPHANY FIVE, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 7, 2021

In today's Gospel reading Mark tells us that Peter's mother-in-law took ill and Jesus went to the house and healed her. Mark then says they brought to Jesus all who were sick and possessed and he cured many. I have always been intrigued by that phrase he cured many. It doesn't say he cured all of them. It begs the questions what does it mean for us when we pray for healing?

I fear that many of us see praying to God as transactional. As someone once phrased it we pray like God is a cosmic vending machine into which we can insert our prayers like so many coins and expect something in return. Or prayers to God are like ATM's, where if you push the right buttons and have your passcode, the answers to your prayers, like money, will come out.

We have often been taught as children that if we pray hard enough and often enough we can heal diseases, prevent car accidents, feed hungry children in faraway countries, fend off nightmares, prevent premature death, and save broken relationships. And if our prayers weren't answered we're told we needed to pray harder, longer, and with more faith. Or if they weren't answered the way we wanted them to then God must have said no. What that translates into is we didn't have the right password (or enough faith) for the ATM God to grant our prayer request.

To ask what role prayer plays in the face of ongoing tragedy, injustice, sickness and oppression in our world is to raise the hardest theological questions I can think of about God. Does God intervene directly in human affairs? Does such intervention ... or lack of it ... depend in any way on the way we pray? Can prayer "change" God? Do our prayers have tangible effects for other people, even when those people have no idea that we're praying for them?

So, in essence, what does it mean to pray for healing for someone? What does it mean if we think our prayers have been or not been answered? Here are two examples.

The author of the children's book, "A Wrinkle in Time", Madeleine L'Engle wrote about her marriage to the actor Hugh Franklin in a book called Two Part Invention. After forty years of marriage Hugh was diagnosed with cancer. Both of them, being lifelong Episcopalians, were surrounded not just by their family and friends but the wider church community that prayed constantly for Hugh's recovery. Despite all the best medical care and prayers Hugh died. Why weren't their prayers for healing answered?

Then there is a story about a young woman who was fighting a terminal illness and also partook of every imaginable medical opportunity until none was left. Friends, family, and church members prayed for the person constantly. Then as a last resort the doctors tried one last experimental program and the cancer receded. Years later she is still alive and is grateful for the gifts of faith, gratitude, and clarity she would never have gotten any other way. In this situation it seems the prayers of healing were answered.

Now both of these people had been surrounded by prayer. For one of them there was what seems to be a cure. For the other there wasn't. What are we to make of that? After her husband died, Madeline L'Engle received many letters of anguish from people who felt their prayers had been for naught and that God had abandoned Hugh by not answering their prayers. However, Madeline responded that their prayers were indeed answered just not in the ways they wanted them to be. She wrote that her husband was

kept comfortable, out of pain and surrounded by love and was at peace with himself, so she felt this in itself was the answer to many prayers.

Maybe the question we need to ask ourselves is what do we want when we pray for someone who is ill? What kind of healing are we praying for? In both of these situations there was healing. Both found a new peace within themselves and a new closeness to God, something different and deeper than a miraculous cure. Both found healing. One found a cure.

Dr. Stephen Post, a researcher on giving, compassionate care and an author on God and love has said, "It is the height of arrogance to think that because you pray for somebody they will be healed, that God will do exactly as you desire. The mystery of God is way beyond our understanding and it isn't that linear. But it would also be the height of ignorance not to try." He said "the most important thing that makes everything go is love—and who in the world doesn't need to be loved?" I can tell one thing. The person who prays for another who is sick or hurting, that person is made better in their own soul. Because any time we get away from our own preoccupation with ourselves and love another person, we are made healthier across the board—mind, body and soul. When you pray for someone, to heal them or to heal yourself, do it in the power of love. That's where the power is.

In our Book of Common Prayer the Catechism defines prayer as "Responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words." If God is alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus then prayer should be like breathing. Basically, we are hardwired for prayer. Prayer is what we do as God's children because we are made in God's image. Prayer will hold us because it is for us. We know and are known in prayer. It is our humanity communicating with the divinity that is alive in each of us

As Christians we know that when we pray, God listens. God may not answer those prayers the way we want but God will still answer those prayers with God's presence in our lives. You see prayer is the presence of God in our lives. Prayer is the turning to God's presence, and this is *always* the answer to our prayers, for that is the purpose of prayer. It is in prayer that we turn to that love, turn to that mercy and understanding, turn to those open arms that are welcoming that we find in God's presence.

Last Sunday, after church I noticed that Paul Nobleman on his Facebook page had asked if anyone wanted prayers said for them. He was inundated with requests. Whether people go to church or not so many people recognize the power of prayer which is that desire to be held up in love to and by something greater than themselves. Let's face it we have almost been a year into the Pandemic shutdown and there are a lot of emotions that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Depression, anxiety, hopelessness, illness and grief in so many instances have taken hold of so many people. There isn't a person here this morning or watching virtually who hasn't, at some time, longed for healing for themselves or someone they love. We long for a healing spirit to work in our bodies, minds and spirits.

When we pray ... when we persist in prayer ... when we name our longings in prayer, God will never fail to give us God's own, abundant, indwelling and overflowing self as the answer we actually need. The God alive in us ... just like the God that was alive in Jesus ... that God that is alive in each of us is there for us always. When we struggle with prayer, God will not withhold God's loving, consoling, healing, transforming, and

empowering Spirit from us. When it comes to no-holds-barred, absolutely self-giving generosity, God's answer to all of our prayers will always be Yes, I am there for you.

It is this yes that is the answer to our prayers. All too often we want stuff from God much more than we want God's presence to come alive in us. All too often we want God to sweep in and fix everything much more than we want God's Spirit to fill us. Resting in God's yes requires vulnerability, patience, courage, discipline and trust. Interestingly enough, these are all traits we can cultivate in prayer.

So we pray. We pray because Jesus taught us to pray. We pray because it's what God's children do. We pray because we yearn and our yearning is precious to God. And we pray because what we need most, whether we recognize it or not, is God's own Spirit pouring God's self into us. With words, without words through laughter, through tears, in hope and in despair our prayers usher in God's Spirit and remind us that we are not alone in this broken, aching world. God's Spirit is our Yes to our prayers. So let us pray with every ounce of our being for the indwelling of God's spirit in all of us. Amen.