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Psalm 1

Gracious God, every day we are bombarded with decision to make. From the mundane decisions like what to eat for breakfast, to the life altering decisions that affect our lives, choices confront us. What do we do? What choice do we make? What affect will this decision have on my life? Lord, we ask that you help us through these questions and help us to make good decisions. We ask for your guidance so that we can travel the path to you. Amen.

“Take it to God in Prayer”

One of the questions I’m often asked is “How should I pray?” When people ask me about prayer I’m always pleased, because it tells me the person is eager to have a deeper relationship with God. They’re ready to take things to the next level, if you will.

For the next four weeks we’re going to move through the book of psalms, which is a prayer book, and look at what these ancient poems and prayers and songs can teach us about prayer. One of my hopes with this series is that it will help you strengthen your prayer life or, if you don’t have one, start one.

For some reason, people automatically assume that pastors are born knowing how to pray, or are taught how to pray in seminary, and therefore hold in our pocket a handy-dandy instruction booklet on how to turn to God in prayer in 3 easy steps. I took a class in seminary on prayer, and I remember really liking the class, but unfortunately it’s been so long since I took it I don’t remember much of what I learned.

Another confession I’ll make this morning is that I’m a bit envious of how well some of my colleagues in ministry pray. I always feel inadequate when it comes to praying, no matter how many times I do it. I listen to other ministers who have long, flowing prayers that come so naturally. Mine are always short, to the point, and a bit formulaic. At least the prayers I use to open and close meetings.

When Terry and I traveled to Jerusalem many years ago, we went to the Western Wall. Jews call it the Wailing Wall and go there to lament the destruction of the temple which happened in 70 CE. The only piece that remains of the temple is western wall. This is the same temple that Jesus prayed at, preached in, and turned over the money changers tables.

If any of you have been to the western wall, you know that there are hundreds of thousands of little white scrolls sticking out of the joints. These little pieces of papers are prayers people have given and left at the wall. Terry and I left our prayers in the wall when we were there.

What I didn't know until just recently, is that nowadays there are agents who work at the wall taking people's calls or e-mails and probably text message prayers, write them on paper, and slip them in the wall. That my friends, is prayer at work in the 21st century!

But the question this scene brings up is the age old question, "Does prayer work?" Does prayer work?

There are at least two answers to that question. The first assumes what we really mean, "Does the prayer bring the outcome I want?" Well, yes, sometimes it does. I know that I pray for things to go a certain direction. For example, before every flight without fail I pray for the plane to take-off and land safely. So far, my prayers have been answered.

We've all heard stories of prayers being answered; inexplicable miracles, surprise healings, coincidences to difficult to comprehend in any other way.

But as we know, answers do not always come in the way we want them to come. Saint Augustine wrote a very frank tell-all book called, appropriately so, "Confessions". Today, the book would be labeled TMI-too much information. Augustine led a rather loose life before he became a saint. When he was about 20, he wanted to go to Rome, which was sort of the Las Vegas of the ancient world. Well, Augustine's mother prayed that her son wouldn't go to Rome.

But of course, off to Rome he went with all its paganism and godlessness and "what happens in Rome, stays in Rome" debauchery. But here's the twist: in Rome, Augustine just happened to walk by a monastery, and it was there he heard the Bible being read. That series of events slowly led Augustine to faith. In the denial of his mother's prayer was the answer.

An old Chinese folktale tells of a farmer who owned only one horse. He depended on the horse to pull the plow and to draw the wagon. One day a bee stung the horse, and in fright it ran away into the mountains. His neighbors said, "We are really sorry about your bad luck in losing your horse." But the old farmer shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck-who is to say?" A week later his horse came back accompanied by twelve wild horses, and the farmer was able to corral all the fine animals. News spread, and his neighbors returned and said, "Congratulations on this fine bonanza," to which the old farmer shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck-who is to say?" The farmer's only son decided to make the most of what looked like good fortune and started to break the wild horses so that they could be sold. But he got thrown from one of them and broke his leg. At the news of this accident, his neighbors came again, saying, "We are so sorry about the bad luck of your son's fall." And, of course, the old farmer shrugged and said, "Bad luck, good luck-who is to say?" Several weeks later, war broke out among the Chinese provinces. The army came through the village and drafted all the young men, but because the old man's son was so badly injured, he did not have to go.

Does prayer work? As the old farmer said, "Who is to say?" *If* by that question we mean, will get what I want? Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Which gets us to the second answer to “Does prayer work?” This answer is much deeper and more subtle. And unlike the first answer, which is about changing the course of events in the outside world, the second answer is about changing me and my relationship to God.

Here is where Psalm 1 can be instructive. Psalm 1 isn’t so much a prayer as much as it is a doorway into the psalms follow. And what it teaches us is that if we meditate on the teachings of God, we will find our lives blessed. In other words, if we take the time in our prayers to focus and center ourselves on God, and God’s teaching and presence, rather than focusing ourselves on, well, ourselves and what we want God to do for us, we will grow in our relationship with God-and that will lead to a blessed life. Which is not to say everything will be hunky-dory.

As we know, because human experience tells us, God doesn’t dole out good fortune in proportion to our goodness, or misfortunate as a consequence of our misdeeds. Sometimes the wicked, as the psalmist refers to people, do have their way. And sometimes tragedy does befall the righteous.

What this psalm encourages us to do is look beyond prayer as another utilitarian function and instead look at prayer as a way to edge into our relationship with God. In this way, we’re not looking so much at trying to change God’s mind, as much as we trying to change our mindset to that of God’s. When that begins to happen, our minds and our hearts become more and curved toward God.

Now, just a couple more brief words on prayer before I end here.

As I said at the beginning, many people ask me how to pray. If you are one of them, you are not alone. Statistics show that most people pray, and most of them think they would pray better. As I said at the beginning, count me among them!

There are three important aspects to any prayer life. The first we’ve already talked about, which is bending our hearts and minds towards God will rather than trying to bend God towards ours. The second is simply being honest that you don’t have it all together-what we call confession. And the third is to take time in your prayers to listen for God. The good news about not knowing how to pray, is that it’s best if you don’t do all the talking. Because if you’re doing all the talking, you’re not listening. And oart of what we do in prayer is listen for God.

And last, if you’re looking for a formula for praying, that handy-dandy 3 step guide, here it is. Years ago I shared it without all. Its based on the acronym ATCS. A is for adoration. Begin your prayer adoring, or praising God. This is as simple as saying, “God you are great. God you are awesome.” As we say at mealtime every night, “God is great, God is good . . .” What comes next?

T: Thank God. Thank you God for this beautiful day. *Elaborate.*

C: is for confess. Confess to God those things you've done or haven't done that have led you away from God and from others.

S: is for supplicate. This is the time you voice your fears and concerns to God. What areas of life do you need help? Ask for help; ask for guidance.

And of course, this goes without saying, praying for others.

And more last thing, weave prayer into your daily. Prayer before meals. Pray while you're in the car. I have a colleague who prays every time she sends an e-mail to someone. Think about that the next time you get an e-mail from a co-worker that makes you want to strangle them! And pray that you don't go down the hall and tell him or her what you really think!

Prayer is a mind set. Not bound by amens.

Let us pray . . .

Loving god,

We praise you.

We thank you.

We humble ourselves before you.

And we ask for your guidance.

God, you know and love us...despite our flaws

Your grace is our nourishment and our inheritance...

Your love is a gift that surrounds us...

Bring us today more fully into the possible...

Into the potential...

Into the people you have made us to be.

Amen.

*Michael Lindvall, "A Geography of God", On Your Knees
Feasting on the Word, Lectionary Commentary Series*

