

## **Anything You Want** Matthew 21: 20-22

Question: Can we really ask for whatever we want in Jesus' name and we'll get it?

Can we really get *anything we want* through prayer? This is another of those questions that we can answer with a clear and definite "Yes" and "No." Prayer is subjective and experiential and tends to confound attempts at rational explanation. At the same time, there is an objective reality regarding prayer that emerges from the breadth and depth of people's shared experiences of prayer. Our shared practice and belief gives prayer a tangible reality at some level. It really works!

Today's Gospel text is a brief story found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, set during the last week of Jesus' life. It took place just outside Jerusalem and is connected to the story of Jesus driving out the moneychangers from the Temple. This is a curious story. Jesus approached a fig tree apparently wanting some fruit. Even though it was not the time nor the season for figs, when he found no figs he cursed the tree.

This is a story about time. There are two concepts of time. *Chronos* or clock time is the unfolding of minutes into years. *Chairos* is the appropriateness or fullness of time. It was not the season for figs in the agricultural sense of chronological time. It was the fullness of time – *chairos* – for Jesus. It was time to reveal the nature of God's new creation.

The fig tree was an image for the temple, the temple-based nation, and the temple cult of Israel. In the Old Testament, the fig tree was a symbol of peace, security, and prosperity representing the golden ages of Israel's past. The blossoming of the fig tree, full of fruit, depicted God's blessing while its withering indicated the withdrawal of God's blessing.

Jesus cursing the fig tree was a sign of the end of the temple age in Israel. The message placed on the lips of Jesus was of the passing away of the familiar and known world of Temple. The urgent message was, "let it go, release it. Recognize and embrace the grief of loss so that you can be open to God's new creation. In Jesus' case, this new creation was received in the form of death, cross, and the hope of resurrection. It takes faith to let go and also faith to hope. It takes faith to receive God's new creation. ((from Ched Myers' *Binding the Strong Man*)

So, back to the question! Can we really get anything we want just by asking? After all doesn't the Bible say, "Ask and you'll receive?" This idea that "whatever you ask for in prayer with faith you will receive" sounds just too good to be true. There must be, and is, a catch – a really big one. It is found in the phrases -- *ask in prayer* and *ask with faith*.

If you're like me, you tend to ask for things allow you to stay where you are only more comfortable. My practice is to request what will ease my discomfort, but not really necessitate change. To ask *in prayer with faith* means to ask with feet ready to move, minds ready to change, hearts ready to grow, and souls ready to be turned inside out! The only real security in life involves moving forward, growing, and changing.

This idea of having "anything we want" lies along that same path. Prayer is not a divine piggy bank or magical genie granting three wishes. The message of the Gospel is of the fullness of time – now. The fig tree is barren, withered, and dead. Don't look to the symbol of death, but look to the new creation of God for life.

Well, maybe we can have anything we want as long as what we want are the right things -- Godly things. This is true in a sense, but wasn't Jesus warning the disciples not to cling for nourishment, support, and meaning to the way of life represented by the Temple? He was calling

them and us to look beyond the security of religion and power to see the new creation of God that cannot be contained in Temple or Church and will not play second fiddle to any other priority in our lives! Prayer is not a wish list, but a discipline to challenge and help us grow and change the focus of our lives. Prayer is a way of being born anew.

What if we really believe strongly? Does our belief or conversely our lack of belief make a crucial difference? Many will tell you that it does. All you have to do is believe strongly enough. If you are not getting what you want in life, then you're not believing strongly enough! It's all in your hands.

This is apparently what Jesus was saying in the *cursed fig tree* story: "whatever you ask for in prayer with faith you will receive." That's true in one sense. You and I have a remarkable ability to get what we really want -- hence the saying "be careful what you wish for..." Virtually any successful person in business, entertainment, etc. will tell you that you have to believe in yourself and your vision. One facet of the message of this story, then, regards the power of clear purpose. When you know what you want, when you visualize it and work for it, very often you'll get it. But then, and often too late, you realize what you've got wasn't really what you wanted and it's not worth what you've given up to get it. That is the sad truth of the lesson of the power of belief. Faith underscores the importance of having what you want be worthy of the effort you give and the sacrifices you make.

There is a second sense in which the power of belief as the determinative factor in prayer is not true -- in which the clarity and strength of your belief does not make the crucial difference. In healing prayer, sometimes those for whom we pray do get better. This can happen whether we are confident in our praying or not. On the other hand, sometimes people die even though we pray for them mightily. Sometimes we console ourselves with the thought that this is "God's will." I find it cold comfort to believe in a concept of God who blithely grants healing or not on some divine whim.

To ask in prayer means putting oneself in sync with God, seeking oneness with Ultimate Concern, or harmony with the *Supranatural* (Einstein's term). Prayer is a process that lifts us out of ourselves to see the universe with the sight of God. We are clearly using symbolic language here, attempting to describe what is for us a deep mystery. Unfortunately, we religious people too easily move to treat the symbolic language of faith as a literal truth. To do this is to greatly reduce its meaning.

To ask with faith means to trust in what we can't see or know or control. We can insight and encouragement in this process from the words of the Lord's Prayer, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven."

This week, many of us have been praying for little Rose Klamm -- praying for a successful result for her surgery. We've been praying for her parents to have wisdom and peace. We have prayed for healing in the past and have seen amazing healing for Rose -- a child we thought might well die. She is now living and thriving. As she goes once again under the knife, all the risks of surgery are magnified by her young age and her past health issues.

What's going on when we pray for Rose? We know that prayer is a way to cope with feelings of helplessness. It seems to bring a measure of control in a situation that feels so beyond our control. The knowledge that we are praying for them supports the family. The act of prayer primes our responses toward Rose's family. It often lifts us out of ourselves to do acts of selfless love.

Prayer does change us to the extent we are willing to be changed. It also opens a space, like the aperture of a camera, in which healing takes place. Whether you call the power God,

Spirit, intimate life force, or the deep reality of universal energy, forces engage that result in the possibility of healing. Sometimes that healing involves the cure or alleviation of symptoms. Sometimes healing is found in death. Sometimes the result is less clear. Always, when we pray, healing comes. As we pray, we are more likely to embrace it.

Take a moment. Spend some time in prayer. Trust that our prayer can change us. Allow your self to let go controlling and to move into a sense of harmony with the breath, the life force, the Spirit. In our fear, in the scary and challenging places of our lives, let us become open to the opportunity to see beyond ourselves – to see all the way to the new creation of God.