

What Prayer Does

Matthew 17: 14-20, 1 Corinthians 13: 2

Can prayer change circumstances or is prayer for our own peace and to simply accept?

Do you pray? What does it mean to pray? Prayer can be the generalized sense of awareness that all of life is inter-connected. We are part of each other, the cosmic forces, and life's ultimate mystery. In this way, to pray means to assent within our minds to the oneness of all existence.

Prayer can also mean the more familiar understanding of choosing to focus our minds and will, directing them toward our God, our ultimate concern, what we value above and beyond anything else. Each of us almost certainly has many gods in our lives. Sometimes I think that we are not even aware of the gods we worship with our time, energy, and passion. This second meaning of prayer, the intentional focus, is often verbalized and spoken aloud. These intentional and specific prayers flow out of our general sense and awareness of the connectedness of our lives to each other and to life's ultimate mystery.

When you pray, for what do you pray? What do you expect from prayer? My intentional prayers are often for myself requesting a sense of peace, a loving attitude, to be present to a particular situation, or to be clear of thought. Prayers to change ourselves are safe prayers. That doesn't mean they are bad or to be avoided. I said this last week as we talked about prayer and I think you may have thought I was trying to be funny. On the contrary, prayer to change self and attitude may be the most effective prayers we say. They are still safe prayers. When I pray each Sunday to be present to the flow of worship and the movement of the Spirit – to release control and trust the work that's been done – to let the Spirit move through (or in spite of) what I say, you won't know I've prayed for those things. It is safe for me to pray that way. I also find that when I pray for people and situations, those prayers also have an effect on me. They can bring about a change in my attitude. Those changes may well be the most powerful and effective result of my praying.

The question on the table today is this: "is there more? Is there something that seems more tangible to us -- results we can see *out there* rather than just *in here*? Our ancient predecessors used to offer sacrifices to the gods to get them to alter their behaviors. As long as there have been people and people have prayed to gods or to God, they have wondered whether prayer actually changes circumstances or merely changes the one who prays. There are actually two really good answers to this question: yes and yes.

Yes, prayer has the power to change the one who is praying with the active consent of that one. It has the power to change attitude, enable new habits of thought, and release self-destructive processes and behaviors. Prayer is the image of tilling the densely-packed soil of the trampled down paths of our lives. Prayer softens our hearts and opens us to the *new*.

Prayer is the energy that focuses and motivates the pray-er, that touches and inspires the one who prays. In a group of pray-ers, this energy can touch and inspire others in the group as well.

The second answer to the question about prayer changing circumstances is also *yes*. Let us move toward that answer by considering the two scripture passages for today: Matthew 17: 14-20 and also 1 Corinthians 13: 3. (from *The Message* translation)

At the bottom of the mountain, they were met by a crowd of waiting people. As they approached, a man came out of the crowd and fell to his

knees begging, "Master, have mercy on my son. He goes out of his mind and suffers terribly, falling into seizures. Frequently he is pitched into the fire, other times into the river. I brought him to your disciples, but they could do nothing for him." Jesus said, "What a generation! No sense of God! No focus to your lives! How many times do I have to go over these things? How much longer do I have to put up with this? Bring the boy here." He ordered the afflicting demon out—and it was out, gone. From that moment on the boy was well. When the disciples had Jesus off to themselves, they asked, "Why couldn't we throw it out?" "Because you're not yet taking God seriously," said Jesus. "The simple truth is that if you had a mere kernel of faith, a poppy seed, say, you would tell this mountain, 'Move!' and it would move. There is nothing you wouldn't be able to tackle."

In Mark's version of this story, the "disciples cornered Jesus and asked, "Why couldn't we throw the demon out?" He answered, "There is no way to get rid of this kind of demon except by prayer."

The point is not that if we believe strongly enough our prayers will be answered. The point is not that if we get rid of any doubt, we'll get that for which we pray. The point is that if we believe strongly enough and "take God seriously enough," the whole focus of our praying and living will be different. We will be radically changed. To this point, the apostle Paul wrote in that powerful chapter of 1 Corinthians about the ultimate spiritual gift that: "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing."

The radical change that is needed in our lives is to love each other and ourselves wholly and divinely: to love our enemies, love our faults, love our weaknesses, and love our potential. Love is the greatest act of faith and prophecy there can be. Prayer is an expression of the will to love. Especially when spoken aloud, prayer is an act of faith not in the outcome of our request but in the essential reality of God.

Our concept of God's nature, of how God works, is not important to the power of prayer. Not knowing what or how to pray doesn't matter at all in terms of the importance of prayer to us or the potential of our prayer to change external circumstances. Paul again spoke to this (Romans 8):

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." (Romans 8: 26-8, NRSV)

Prayer has the power that effects people and circumstances around us. In this regard, the image that helps me grasp the nature of that power is the "butterfly effect" in which the flapping of a butterfly's wings on one part of the earth might eventually result in a hurricane in another part of the planet. We don't know and can't control the result of prayer. By faith, we trust in its overall benefit.

Prayer is the expressing of faith through thought and speech. Part of the faith stance of prayer is that mysterious opening we make in life – perhaps in the underlying emotional process

system of humanity -- through which an aspect of God is freed up to affect the system as a whole. Failed prayer, such as in the story of the disciples who were unable to accomplish their healing task, reminds us that we need to take our commitment to the God values espoused by Jesus very seriously in our lives.

Prayer is the primary vehicle for bringing the dimension of God who is in partnership with us into the effort. To activate that God partnership in us, prayer needs to be in our voice. We can be inspired and taught by reading the prayers of others. Our capacity for prayer can grow as the result of theological reflection and growth. But do not let your prayer be stymied by someone else's opinion as to how you should pray. Your prayer flows from your inmost being and best reflects your authentic self.

To review, it can be helpful to do lots of thinking about and analyzing of prayer, but none of this should inhibit our praying. Prayer can always change the *pray-er*. Prayer can always result in healing and such healing can be manifested different ways that are not under our control. Prayer releases forces, but these can't be predicted or controlled. Prayer engages the energy of the Spirit. Prayer is an expression of faith. It is a proclamation of where you stand. It is your voice spoken loudly and clearly. Whatever form of prayer is right for you – whether it makes sense, is radical or theologically correct – that is what you should pray. Amen.