

The Journey of Prayer

John 9:1-41

Jesus healed a blind man. One day, when was walking with his disciples, they noticed the blind man and that prompted them to ask Jesus a theological question. “Was it the man’s sin that caused him to be born blind? Or was it his parents’ sin?” They assumed that blindness was the result of sin. We all have some need to explain why things such as blindness happen. It helps us not feel completely helpless or out of control.

“Don’t play that blame game!” The healing of this man will show God’s light in the world. Then, without even asking if he wanted to be healed, Jesus did something very strange. He spat on the ground making a muddy paste, rubbed it on the man’s eyes, and told him to go wash in Siloam pool.

Can you imagine that exchange from the perspective of the blind man? You’re sitting there and suddenly somebody rubs mud in your eye. Then they tell you to go wash it off! I believe I would be a little offended by those circumstances. The man, however, went and did as Jesus told him. What do you know? He could see!

The man was happy because he could see. Jesus and disciples were satisfied. The man’s family was pleased because he was not dependent on them any more? Everything seemed great. It was a win, win, win situation. Then, the neighbors started talking and, to make matters worse, they got some religious leaders involved. The problem was that the healing took place on the Sabbath. This prompted the question “by whose authority was Jesus healing?”

So, the healed man was hauled in to answer questions. His parents were questioned, too. Being wise parents, they deferred and let their grown son answer for himself. “I don’t know who he was, but I do know that he opened my eyes. I was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see!”

Why were the religious leaders so upset? They were proud to be disciples of Moses. Jesus’ healing threatened their power base, their status as the religious experts. The real rub was this idea that the man’s blindness was the result of sin. It was not just his healing on the Sabbath that got them upset. Jesus’ action bypassed the power and prerogative of the Temple to forgive sin and reconcile people to God. It seems strange that they seemed to care more about protecting their threatened power than about the wonder of sight restored to a blind beggar. Maybe it’s not so strange. Maybe it is quite normal for people to desire to hold on to power and to protect their vested interests. It reminds me of a cartoon in which a well-to-do gentleman heard the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler -- “Sell everything you have and give it to the poor; then follow me.” He was heard to say, “Everything? How inconvenient!”

When the formerly blind man saw Jesus a second time, he was able to profess belief in Jesus. It turns out that the religious leaders, the Pharisees, were blind in their own way. They refused to open their eyes to see Jesus and the light he brought. They refused to

consider the possibility that something fundamentally new was happening. They could not see beyond the parameters of the world they had built. As a result, they had little compassion for the man born blind. They only saw that their convenient world-view was being challenged. They ignored the wonder of the healing and focused instead on a technical violation of the Sabbath Law. They perceived a threat to their own status and were offended by the compassionate work of Jesus.

I am reminded of the well-know Christian speaker Tony Campolo. He is known for a direct style and occasionally colorful language. He once told a church group, “I have three things I'd like to say today. First, while you were sleeping last night, 30,000 kids died of starvation or diseases related to malnutrition. Second, most of you don't give a sh--. What's worse is that you're more upset with the fact that I said sh— than by the fact that 30,000 kids died last night.”

What does all this have to do with prayer? Since coming to Kansas City and encouraging this congregation to ask questions, I have received more questions on the topic of prayer than on any other topic. The result is that I have been challenged to clarify my thoughts and understanding regarding prayer. I have responded on several occasions to your questions on prayer.

Journey is a helpful image for the life of faith. After all, journeys have a started place, a beginning. Then, there is progress and usually change. Journeys are times of reassessment. At some point, our thoughts turn to our destinations, where life is headed. Journey can also be a helpful image for prayer -- prayer as journey. It is the journey of our lives. This is in addition to our usual understanding of prayer as a kind of transaction -- something we do at specific times.

How we pray, as well as how we think about prayer, changes over the years. Hopefully, our understanding of prayer and how we pray grows and develops over the course of lifetime. It has been said that ministry is made up of hundreds and thousands of individual interactions, always in the present tense.

This truth is certainly real that the love of Christ we share with others is given in specific times, places, and interactions. It is the same with praying for and with others. We offer specific prayers for particular purposes and goals. There is also a cumulative aspect to the love we share, to our ministry, and to prayer that is more than the sum total of our specific prayers.

Over the course of our lifetimes, the purpose of our praying moves us toward something, toward some place that can change us in a developmental way. This process has the potential somehow to draw us into God and into relationship with others for whom and with whom we pray. Prayer draws us into ourselves, into a deeper knowledge and love that involves our hearts, minds, and wills – the deepest dimensions of who we are.

Prayer is a deep, rich, and varied process. There is a rhythm to our specific prayers, our thoughts, and our feelings about those prayers. This includes specific times of listening

before and after specific times of pray. The rhythm also includes thinking about prayer, talking about prayer, and those amazing mysterious times when we are not consciously thinking about prayer -- when the Spirit weaves our unconscious mind together with the fabric of the universe.

Let me illustrate what I mean about the breadth and depth of the journey nature of prayer with an example from my own experience. When I began considering accepting a call from this congregation to move from Virginia and come to Kansas City to be the senior pastor of Crossroads church, I spent a great deal of time in prayer. What I don't mean by that is this: I did not spent five to seven hours each day on my knees articulating specific words and thoughts toward God, though that was part of it. I also did not spent most of my waking hours in silence and meditation off by myself, though that was part of it.

What I did was allow the decision to be present in my mind and heart almost all the time so that, in my praying, thinking, and meditation, in my conversations with others, my study, and in my time at home, the decision was constantly with me. I was conscious of holding my thoughts and the decision in a constant partnership, friendship, with God. In the space of that partnership, I held thoughts about my past, about my future, and about my family. In the space of that partnership, I talked with my family. Prayer is not just a solitary endeavor. I thought about my hopes and my calling. Through this process, I became aware gradually of a growing clarity regarding what I needed to do with my life and the sorts of decisions I needed to be making.

There was another growing clarity as well. Gradually, I became aware of releasing fears about this decision. Then, consciously, I began releasing the need to control the totality of the decision – especially what this church was deciding. Finally, I made the decision with my family and in conjunction with this congregation. The journey of prayer through that particular time was not one transaction, but a but a series of specific prayers surrounded by lots of listening, trying out possibilities in my mind, and then finding, choosing, and coming toward action.

Prayer is a journey much like that blind man's whose first encounter with Jesus brought him sight. His second encounter with Jesus, after wrestling with the religious leaders, brought him to the point of belief and commitment. All our senses, all our capacities, are part of prayer. It's a matter of learning to trust the process. On any journey, you need some faith in the means of transport, whether it's a roadway, a railway, an airline, or a sidewalk! There needs to be a certain sense of abandonment to the process. Prayer is not always graceful, but it is always grace-filled,

The journey of prayer can certainly change us. The process of prayer, those life changing experiences we surround with prayer, and the prayers themselves shape us as people. On the journey of prayer, life's detours become significant course changes. Prayer is the journey of our lives lived in the rhythm of listening and action, holding open space, and finding our deepest selves. Formulating your thoughts and giving them to God requires faith, courage, and a willingness to hold open sacred space.

Jesus asked the man who formerly was blind, “Do you believe in me?”
“I don’t even know who you are, but you touched my life and made me see”

The man worshipped based on experience -- what Jesus did in his life. Ultimately, it doesn’t matter so much what you believe about Jesus. What matters is Jesus -- just Jesus. It doesn’t matter so much what you believe about prayer. What matters is praying -- just praying. Prayer includes your whole self.

Do you ever have trouble with praying? Do you wonder, “Is anybody out there, or in there? Does prayer affect anything? Am I doing it right? Am I even praying to the right God?” The last thing Jesus said in the story today, “I came into this world so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Prayer is the process of seeing our own blindness and learning to see with the sight of God. Faith is trusting that is enough.